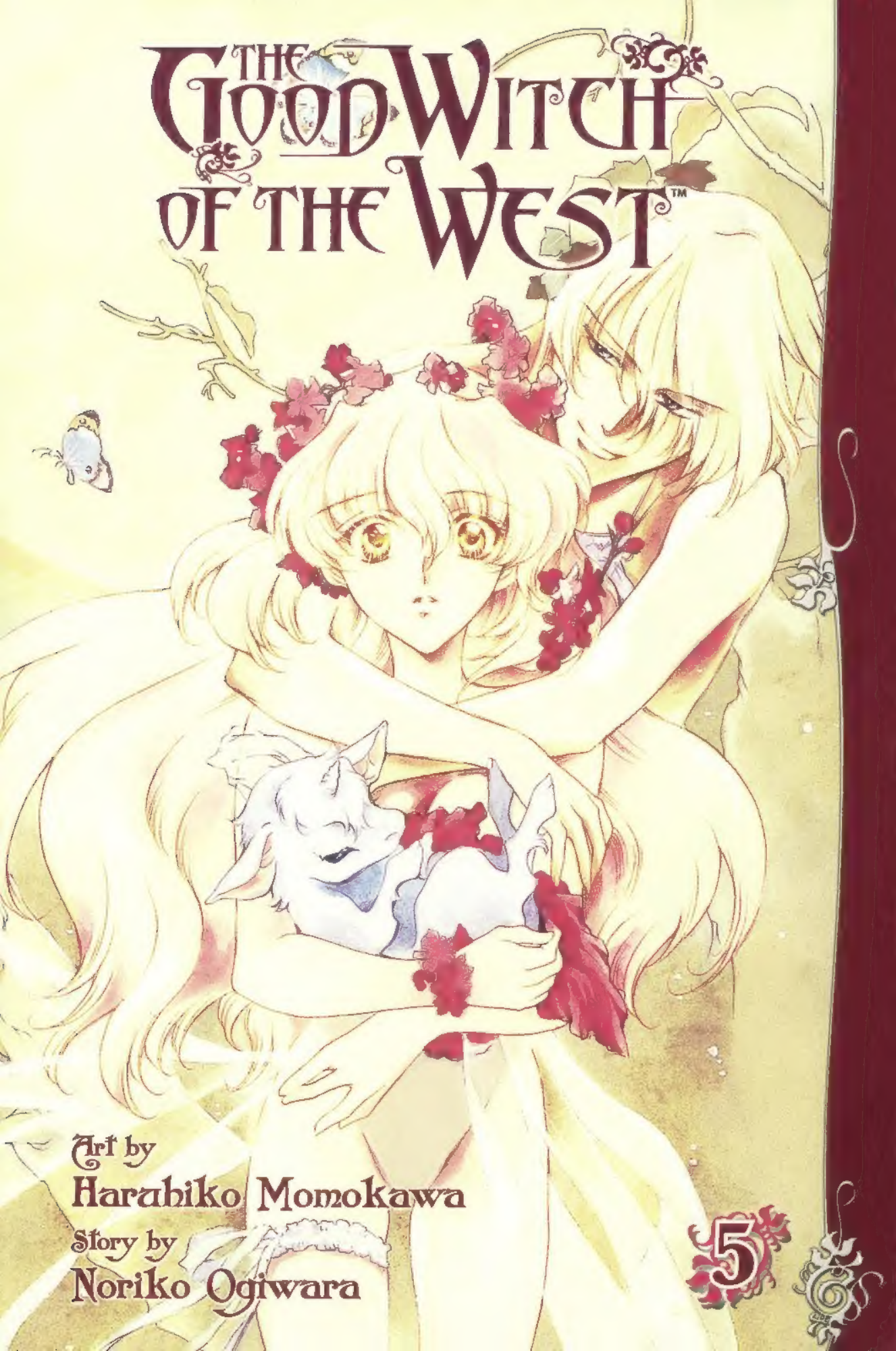
The Good Witch of the West™



Art by
Harahiko Momokawa

Story by
Noriko Ogiwara

5

The Good Witch of the West Volume 5

Story By Noriko Ogiwara

Art By Haruhiko Momokawa

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THE GOOD WITCH OF THE WEST™

Story by Noriko Ogiwara
Art by Haruhiko Momokawa

Volume 5

Story so far in

THE GOOD WITCH OF THE WEST™

The Star Queen Astraea rules Graal, a fairy-tale kingdom in which good and the Light prevail. Heretics are condemned with the utmost fervor. But one of the daughters of the Star Queen, Edilene, chose a heretic as a lover and was banished with him to a cold tower in the harsh highlands of Sera Field.

Years later, fifteen-year-old Firiel Dee, daughter of the reclusive Professor Dee and the late Edilene, learns she's a Queen-in-Waiting, a potential heir to the throne of Graal, when an unusual heirloom necklace was recognized at the Roland family ball as proof of her royal blood!

Soon after, her father went missing and her home was destroyed. She made a bargain with House Roland to protect Rune from being kidnapped by the Circle of Hermes, a heretical organization that desires the professor's research.

As her end of the bargain, Firiel joins Adale at court after training at Taurus Academy finishing school. Firiel must champion Adale while an evil Queen-in-Waiting, Leandra, seeks to take the throne. But Leandra strikes her own bargain with Rune. Soon after, Leandra's fiancé, Duke Riez, is murdered and Rune flees...

Main Characters

Firiel

Rune

Adale

Eusis

Professor Dee

Lot

Tabitha and Bo Holy

Leandra Cheviat

Marie

Main Characters

Ravenna

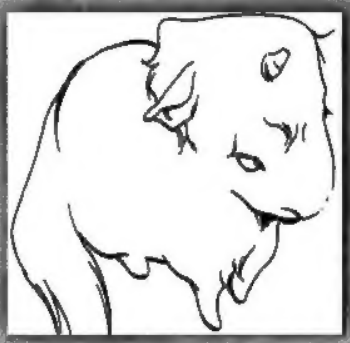
Igraine

Vincent

Cisaria

Margot and
Owen Roland

Liamon Riez



Ruu

Augusta

Prophecy

The Good Witch of the West
and the Brave King of the East
summoned a wise man and a poet,
then traveled to an icy city.
The end begins when the
midday star falls from the sky.
Who is standing behind you?
That...

(from a children's tale in Fentsrell)

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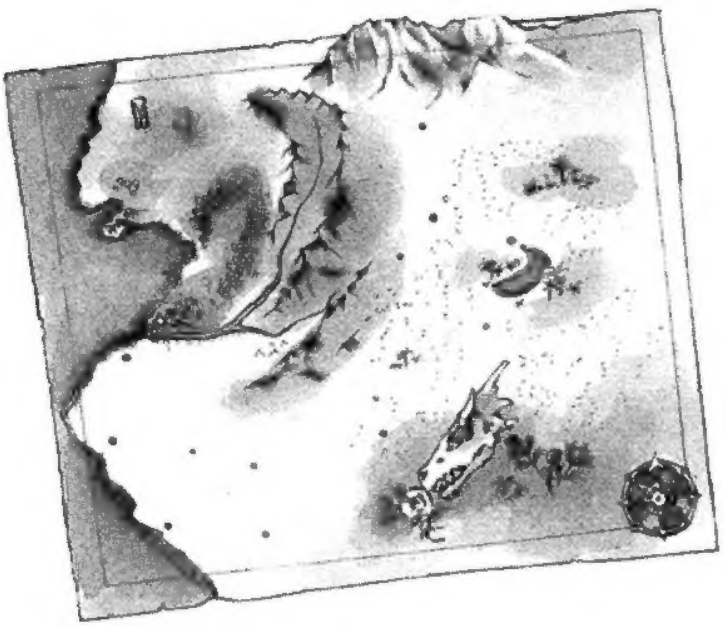


"I WANTED TO STAY WITH YOU. I REALLY DID."
"GOOD BYE..."
IS FIRIEL STILL REFUSING TO GET OUT OF BED?

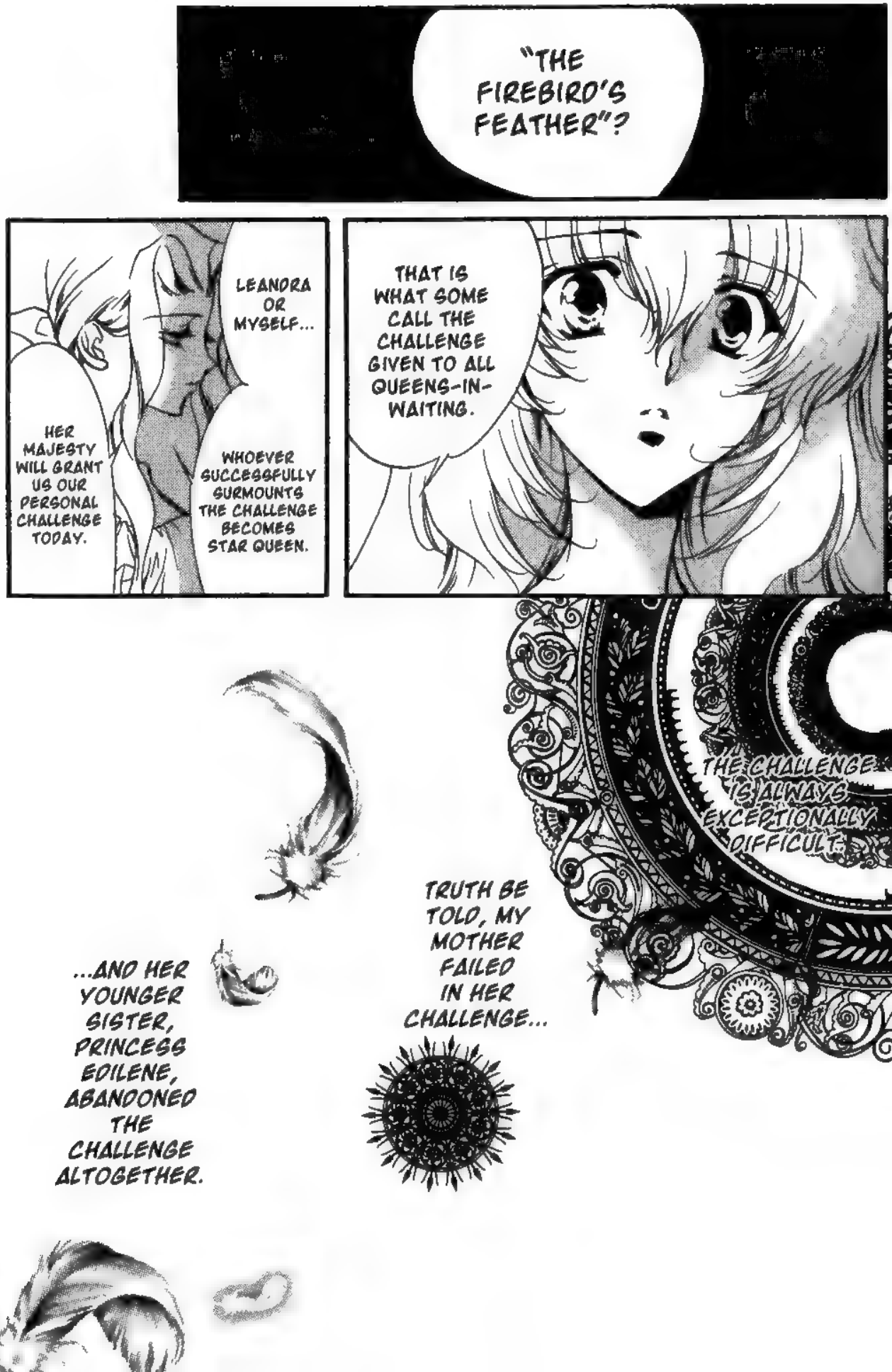
Chapter 20: Canon

I CANNOT BELIEVE THAT SIR RUNE MANAGED TO ESCAPE THE PALACE GROUNDS WITHOUT ANY OUTSIDE HELP.
WHILE IT IS POSSIBLE HE PERPETRATED THE ACTUAL CRIME...
...THERE HAS TO BE SOMEONE ELSE IN THE COURT WHO ABETTED HIM. WILLFULLY.
AND I KNOW PRECISELY WHO SHE IS.
ON THE GRAND STAGE OF THE ROYAL COURT...
...SHE PLAYS THE PART OF "BEREAVED WIDOW" TO PERFECTION.
VERY IMPRESSIVE.

"GRACIOUS STARS IN THE HEAVENS! YOU TWO ARE FILTHY!"
"MA'AM TABITHA? DON'T HE TALK?"
"HE'S ALL COVERED IN BOO-BOOS!"

THESE ARE
NOT
YOURS."
BYE..."

RUNE!!
huff
huff
HE'S GONE INTO A DARKNESS WHERE I CAN'T REACH.
HE'S GONE.
RUNE, WHERE ARE YOU?


"THE FIREBIRD'S FEATHER"?
LEANDRA OR MYSELF...
HER MAJESTY WILL GRANT US OUR PERSONAL CHALLENGE TODAY.
WHOEVER SUCCESSFULLY SURMOUNTS THE CHALLENGE BECOMES STAR QUEEN.
THAT IS WHAT SOME CALL THE CHALLENGE GIVEN TO ALL QUEENS-IN-WAITING.
THE CHALLENGE IS ALWAYS EXCEPTIONALLY DIFFICULT.
TRUTH BE TOLD, MY MOTHER FAILED IN HER CHALLENGE...
...AND HER YOUNGER SISTER, PRINCESS EDILENE, ABANDONED THE CHALLENGE ALTOGETHER.

PLEASE, FIRIEL!
WITHOUT YOU BY MY SIDE, I CAN'T....!
BUT...
FIRIEL, IT WOULD MEAN WORLDS TO ME IF YOU CAME ALONG, EVEN IF JUST TO THE ANTE-CHAMBER.
ADALE...
PLEASE!!
ALL RIGHT...
ACK! THAT LOOK OF HERS MELTS ME!
FIRIEL, I BEG YOU! WITH YOU ALONGSIDE ME...
...I KNOW I COULD FACE WHATEVER TAUNTS LEANDRA HANDS ME WITHOUT FLINCHING!

CENTRAL TOWER, HIERAGLION PALACE

THIS STAIRCASE IS SO LONG! CLIMBING IT EVERY DAY MUST BE A PAIN!
WHAT, NO GREETING? HOW RUDE OF YOU, ADALE ROLAND.

IT WOULD SAVE EVERYONE SO MUCH FUSS AND BOTHER.
OH REALLY?
THEN, AS YOUNGER, WHY DON'T YOU ABDICATE YOUR POSITION AND LEAVE EVERY-THING TO ME, YOUR ELDER?
ALLOWING THE ELDER TO SPEAK FIRST IS PROPER MANNERS.
HMM. NEVER AT A LOSS FOR WORDS, ARE YOU?
WHO HER MAJESTY CONFIRMS AS QUEEN-IN-WAITING FIRST OR LAST AND WHAT THEIR AGE MAY BE AT THE TIME HAS NO BEARING. ALL OF US ARE PRECISELY EQUAL IN RANK.
THERE IS NO ORDER OF PRECEDENCE AMONG QUEENS-IN-WAITING.

...THAT SOMEDAY SOON THERE WILL BE WAR IN GRAAL.
BRIGION IS ALREADY ON OUR DOORSTEP.
NOW IS NOT THE TIME TO BE PIDDLING ABOUT WITH SUCCESSIONS AND INTERNAL POLITICS.
WE SHOULD BE MAKING PLANS FOR RAISING AND MOBILIZING THE ARMY.
I'M AFRAID I MUST DISAGREE WITH YOU.
THIS IS WHAT'S SO AMAZING ABOUT ADALE.
SHE MAY APPEAR FRAIL AND DELICATE...
...BUT ON THE INSIDE, SHE'S ANYTHING BUT!
YOU DO REALIZE THAT AS LONG AS YOU PERSIST IN BEING STUBBORN...
...AND THE STALEMATE BETWEEN ROLAND AND CHEVIAT REMAINS UNBROKEN...

WHY MUST YOU ALWAYS BE THIS WAY?
WHY CAN YOU NOT THINK ABOUT FOSTERING ALLIES FOR ONCE, INSTEAD OF DESTROYING ENEMIES?!
ARMIES AND BATTLES ARE THE VERY LAST RESORT! WE MUST DO EVERYTHING WE CAN TO SOLVE THIS IN A PEACEFUL MANNER FIRST!
AND FIRIEL DISAGREES WITH YOU, TOO!
SHE'S A USELESS LITTLE THING, ALWAYS TURNING TO OTHERS TO SOLVE HER PROBLEMS. WHAT USE WOULD SOMEONE LIKE THAT BE TO ME?
HMM. "FOSTERING ALLIES"?
LIKE YOUR PET KITTEN THERE? DON'T MAKE ME LAUGH.

AFTER ALL, IF ADALE FAILS HERE...
...COUNT ROLAND CERTAINLY CONSIDERS YOU AN ACCEPTABLE REPLACEMENT FOR HER.
IF YOU TRULY ARE OF ROYAL BLOOD, KITTEN, THEN WHY DON'T YOU SHOW A LITTLE BACKBONE, HMM? GIVE ME SOME PROOF THAT YOU'RE CAPABLE OF SAY, TAKING OVER THE ENTIRE HOUSE ROLAND.
YOUR OWN SPINE-LESSNESS IS AT FAULT, YOU KNOW.
IF YOU HAD ONE, YOU WOULDN'T BE HERE LAMENTING HOW POWERLESS YOU ARE WITH RUNETTE STOLEN OUT FROM UNDER YOUR VERY NOSE.
IT'S HER...!

I CAN FEEL IT.
ONE OF HER "GAMES"...
...HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH RUNE'S DISAPPEARANCE!
SHE SEES PEOPLE AS NOTHING MORE THAN CHESS PIECES TO BE MOVED ABOUT THE BOARD AT HER WHIM.

"WHOSOEVER STOPS THE INVASION BY THE FORCES OF BRIGION IN THE NAME OF THE GOOD WITCH OF THE WEST SHALL BE DECLARED GRAAL'S NEXT STAR QUEEN."
BUT THERE IS SOMETHING AMISS ABOUT IT, I KNOW IT.
THAT IS OUR "FIREBIRD'S FEATHER."
HMM...
"IN THE NAME OF THE GOOD WITCH OF THE WEST..." PERHAPS THAT IS A HINT.
SINCE HER MAJESTY IS CURRENTLY AWAY FROM THE PALACE, HIGH PRIEST MENUEL PRESENTED THE FEATHER, BUT I AM CERTAIN HIS EMINENCE SIMPLY READ SOMETHING HER MAJESTY WROTE.
AMISS? LIKE WHAT?
IT IS ENTIRELY TOO DIRECT! TOO UNCOM-PLICATED!
THE STRANGE CHALLENGE... HER MAJESTY'S ABSENCE...

FIRIEL, I CANNOT HELP BUT FEEL THAT THERE IS SOMETHING MORE TO THIS "FIREBIRD'S FEATHER" THAN MEETS THE EYE.

knock knock
FIRIEL?
MAY I COME IN?

EUSIS?
AH, ADALE. YOU'RE HERE AS WELL. PERFECT.
THERE IS SOMETHING I NEED TO ANNOUNCE TO YOU BOTH.
GRAAL'S SOUTHERN NEIGHBOR KAGWELL HAS FORMALLY PETITIONED FOR ASSISTANCE WITH DESTROYING A DRAGON.
I SHALL FOLLOW GRAAL'S TRADITION AND VOLUNTEER TO BE THE DRAGON KNIGHT. IN A FEW DAYS, I WILL BE LEAVING AT THE HEAD OF A PHALANX OF KNIGHTS TO GO DEFEAT THE DRAGON.

YOU'RE GOING TO BATTLE...
...A DRAGON?!
ADALE?

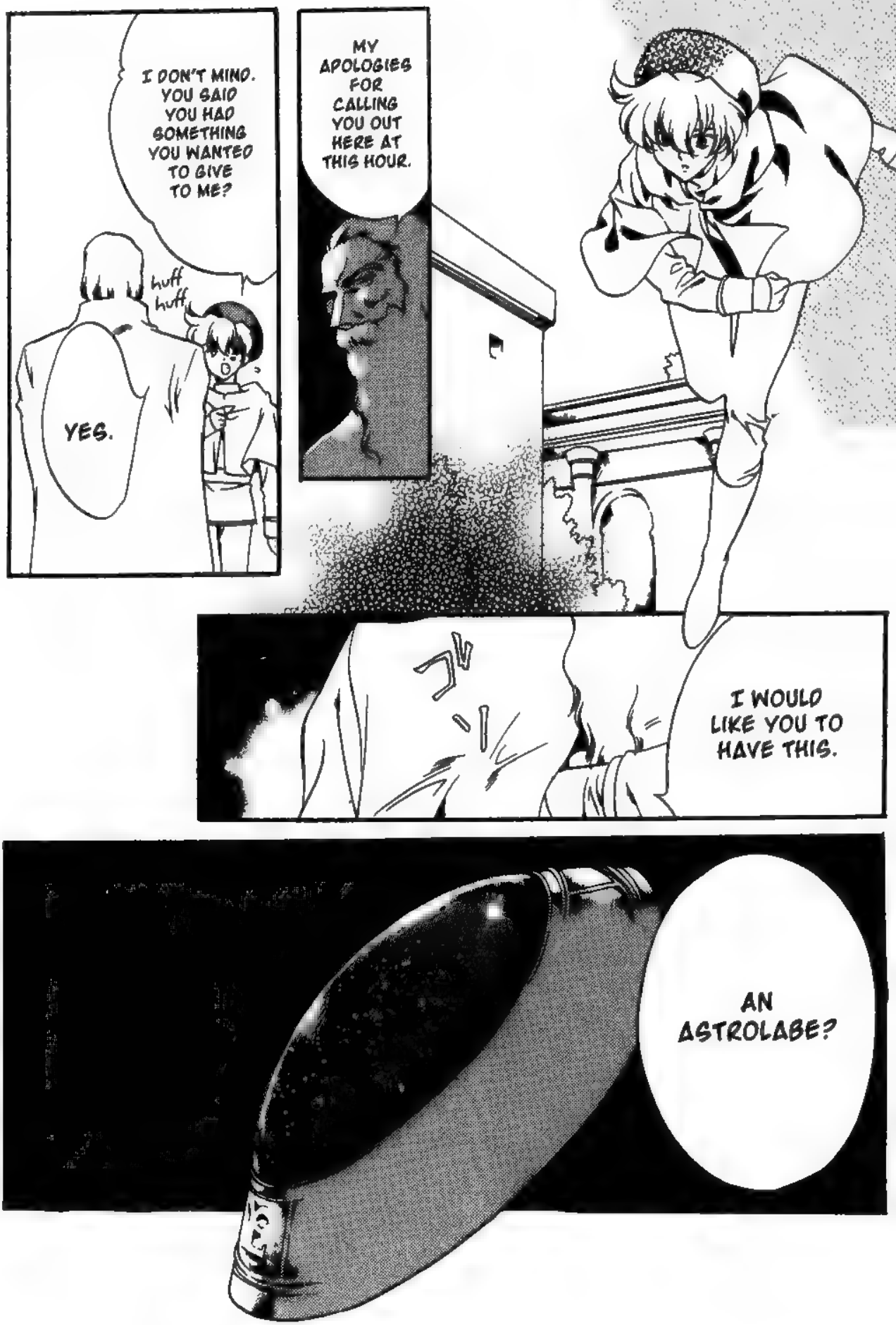
MORE THAN ONE RUMOR CIRCULATING THE PALACE HAS DUKE RIEZ'S ASSASSINATION PINNED FIRMLY ON HOUSE ROLAND.
YOU KNOW THE ANSWER TO THAT, ADALE. RIGHT NOW, CHEVIAT HAS THE ADVANTAGE OVER US IN THE COURT.
MY VOLUNTEERING TO BE DRAGON KNIGHT IN YOUR NAME IS THE BEST WAY TO CLEAR EVERYONE'S DOUBTS ABOUT ROLAND'S INTEGRITY.
IT WILL SHOW THEM THAT THERE ARE HONORABLE KNIGHTS STILL WILLING TO RISK THEIR LIVES FOR YOU AND ROLAND.
WHY?! WHY MUST YOU BE THE ONE TO VOLUNTEER?!
IT'S A STUPID, MOLDY OLD TRADITION THAT NO ONE CARES ABOUT! WHY?!
I WILL NOT APPROVE IT.
ADALE...?

...THERE CANNOT BE A DRAGON KNIGHT IN MY NAME.
WITHOUT MY APPROVAL AS QUEEN-IN-WAITING...
AND I WILL NOT APPROVE YOU AS DRAGON KNIGHT! I REFUSE! DO YOU HEAR? I REFUSE!!
ADALE...?

WHAT'S GOTTEN INTO HER?
ADALE!
ADALE...
MAY I COME IN...?
FIRIEL...

STAY.
THERE IS SOMETHING I WOULD LIKE YOU TO HEAR.
MY BIRTH FATHER WAS NAMED FELIX. HE WAS MY MOTHER'S KNIGHT.
I APOLOGIZE FOR GETTING SO UPSET. IT WAS VERY UNLADYLIKE OF ME.
IT'S OKAY.
I AM SORRY.
IF MY LORD BROTHER DIES, IT WILL BE ALL MY FAULT!
HE DIDN'T SURVIVE THE HUNT.
DURING THE LAST SUCCESSION WAR, PRINCESS EDILENE HELD THE ADVANTAGE BY A SIZEABLE MARGIN.
IN ORDER TO CLOSE THAT MARGIN, FELIX PETITIONED TO BECOME A DRAGON KNIGHT IN MY MOTHER'S NAME. SHE AGREED.

...THEN THIS NEVER WOULD HAVE HAPPENED!
ADALE...
IF ONLY...
...BUT I HAVE FAILED...!!
IF ONLY I WERE CLEARLY BETTER THAN LEANDRA...
I STUDIED SO HARD TO MAKE SURE SOMETHING LIKE THIS WOULD NEVER HAPPEN.
I WORKED AS HARD AS I COULD SO THAT I COULD PREVENT HIM FROM NEEDING TO GO TO WAR.
I TRIED TO MASTER EVERYTHING A QUEEN MUST KNOW SO THAT I COULD PROTECT HIM...


I DON'T MIND. YOU SAID YOU HAD SOMETHING YOU WANTED TO GIVE TO ME?
huff huff
YES.
MY APOLOGIES FOR CALLING YOU OUT HERE AT THIS HOUR.
I WOULD LIKE YOU TO HAVE THIS.
AN ASTROLABE?

IT USED TO BE BURIED IN THE BACK OF MY STORAGE ROOM, COVERED IN DUST.
BUT NOW IT LOOKS AS CLEAN AND GOOD AS NEW, CORRECT? THAT IS BECAUSE THE BOY POLISHED IT NEARLY EVERY DAY.
I CANNOT IGNORE MY ROLE IN THIS.
YOU SEE, I ADVISED HIM THAT IT WOULD BE BEST IF HE GAVE YOU UP.
I TOLD HIM YOU LIVE IN WORLDS TOO DIFFERENT TO BE TOGETHER.
BUT I... UNDER-STAND...
...WHY RUNE WOULD HAVE SPENT SO MUCH TIME POLISHING THIS.
IT'S LIKE HE'S STILL RIGHT HERE...

WHAT?!
FIRIEL, YOU CANNOT BE SERIOUS!!
YOU TRULY WANT TO CALL OFF YOUR ENGAGEMENT AND GO SOUTH TO KAGWELL?!
YES.
I'M GOING TO THE DRAGON FOREST!

I CAME TO HIERAGLION FOR RUNE'S SAKE.
I WANTED TO PROTECT HIM.
I'VE MADE UP MY MIND, ADALE.
THE JUNGLES OF THE SOUTH HIDE COUNTLESS DANGERS! DRAGONS! POISONOUS BEASTS! BANDITS!
I BEG YOU TO RECONSIDER! WHATEVER REASON YOU MAY HAVE FOR GOING, IT'S NOT--
BUT THAT WILL BE SUICIDE!
BUT HE'S NOT HERE ANYMORE. MY REASON FOR STAYING VANISHED WITH HIM THE NIGHT HE DISAPPEARED.
HE NEEDS TO KNOW THAT EVEN THOUGH HE MAY BE BORN OF DARKNESS...
...LEAVING ME BEHIND WAS A MISTAKE.
NOW MY ONLY WISH IS TO SEE HIM AGAIN...
...AND TELL HIM SOMETHING.

I WANT TO SHOW HIM THAT NO MATTER WHERE HE GOES, I'LL FOLLOW HIM.
EVEN IF IT'S INTO THE DEEPEST DARKNESS IN THE WHOLE WORLD.
SO I PLAN TO GO STRAIGHT DOWN THERE MYSELF AND WAIT FOR HIM.
HE MAY NOT BE THERE YET, BUT...
...HE'LL GO SOUTH EVENTUALLY, BECAUSE THAT'S WHERE THE PROFESSOR WENT.
B-BUT...

NO! I DON'T WANT YOU TO GO!!
PLEASE, FIRIEL! NO! I COULDN'T STAND IT IF YOU LEFT ME, TOO!!
ADALE, THINK ABOUT WHERE I'M GOING.
SOUTH. IF I'M THERE WITH EUSIS, I MIGHT BE ABLE TO DO SOMETHING TO PROTECT HIM.
DO WHAT? HE WILL BE BATTLING DRAGONS, FIRIEL!
LOTS OF THINGS! LIKE DRUG HIS FOOD SO HE CAN'T GO OUT AND FIGHT AND SNEAKY STUFF LIKE THAT!

...I THINK IT IS BEST THAT YOU STAY HERE IN THE PALACE, AND DO WHAT YOU NEED TO DO.
I'LL STAY IN THE SHADOWS AND FOLLOW HIM SOUTH, DOING WHATEVER I CAN TO PROTECT HIM.
IT DOESN'T MATTER WHERE I AM, ADALE, I'M STILL ON YOUR SIDE.
FOR EUSIS' SAKE...
YOU'RE BATTLING FOR POSITION AND INFLUENCE EVERY DAY IN THE COURT.
EVEN YOUR MOTHER, PRINCESS EDILENE, WAS NOT SO INCREDIBLE AS THIS.
...I HAVE EVER SEEN ANYONE AS EXTRAORDINARY AS YOU, MISS FIRIEL.
UNBELIEV-ABLE. I DO NOT THINK...

NOT A FLOWER THAT IS PRUNED AND TRAINED BY HUMAN HANDS...
...BUT A WILD ROSE THAT GROWS AND BLOOMS UNDER HER OWN POWER.
I AM SURE I WILL REMEMBER ITS FRAGRANCE FOR AS LONG AS I LIVE.
WHILE YOU MAY YET BE JUST A BUD...
...I BELIEVE YOU WILL BLOOM INTO A WONDERFULLY FRAGRANT FLOWER ALL ON YOUR OWN.
PLEASE...
...TAKE CARE OF MY SON.

THE GOOD WITCH OF THE WEST AND THE BRAVE KING OF THE EAST SUMMONED A WISE MAN AND A POET, THEN TRAVELED TO AN ICY CITY.
THE END BEGINS WHEN THE MIDDAY STAR FALLS FROM THE SKY.
WHO IS STANDING BEHIND YOU?
THAT...
WOULD YOU PLEASE...
MOTHER.
I HAVE A REQUEST.

HANG IN THERE, RUNE.
I WON'T EVER LET YOU BE LOST AND ALONE.
I SWEAR I'LL FIND YOU, NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE!
ハッ!!

GOODBYE...
...GRANDMOTHER.
HIERAGLION, THE PLACE WHERE MY PARENTS MET-- GOODBYE. GOODBYE, COURT.

NEXT STOP...
...THE SOUTH!!

ガサ
ゴゴゴ
WHEW! I NEVER EXPECTED THE SOUTHERN JUNGLE TO BE THIS HUGE!

Chapter 21: The Bronze-Haired Maiden

I HOPE THERE'S A SPRING AROUND HERE SOMEWHERE.
FIRIEL...
...PLEASE, BE CAREFUL. THE JUNGLES HIDE UNTOLD DANGERS!
WHEW.

HUH?
RU--?!

GILVIA PROVINCE, ON THE GRAAL/ KAGWELL BORDER. THE DUKE'S CASTLE...
AAH, YOUNG LORD ROLAND! IT IS AN HONOR TO MEET YOU! NEVER DID I DREAM THAT I WOULD HAVE THE PLEASURE OF HOSTING SUCH A SPLENDID DRAGON KNIGHT AT MY HUMBLE CASTLE.
THANK YOU FOR YOUR KIND WORDS, DUKE GILVIA. WE APPRECIATE YOUR HOSPITALITY.

THERE IS NO LIVING CREATURE AS FEARSOME AS A DRAGON.
THOSE DRAGONS ARE QUITE PASSIVE, AND HARDLY EVER ATTACK HUMANS. HOWEVER, THEY DEVOUR OUR CROPS WITH A VORACIOUS APPETITE.
TROUBLE USUALLY BEGINS WHEN A HERD OF PLANT-EATING DRAGONS APPEARS.
SHOULD THEY BE CHASED OFF QUICKLY, THERE'S NO FUSS, BUT IF THEY ARE NOT, THEN MEAT-EATING DRAGONS MAY APPEAR.
HUGE AND DANGER-OUS, THEY FOLLOW THEIR PREY WHERE-EVER.
THE MOMENT ONE IS SIGHTED, WHAT WAS A NUISANCE BECOMES A DANGER OF THE HIGHEST ORDER. YOU SEE, NO NORMAL MAN CAN KILL THE VICIOUS BEASTS.

WE RECEIVED REPORTS THAT, JUST THE OTHER DAY, TWO VILLAGES ON THE EDGE OF THE JUNGLE WERE COMPLETELY DESTROYED.
I AM HERE UNDER ORDER OF HER MAJESTY THE STAR QUEEN HERSELF.
I SWEAR I WILL DO WHATEVER I CAN TO DESTROY THESE DRAGONS...
...AND RESTORE YOUR PEOPLE'S SAFETY-- EVEN AT THE COST OF MY OWN LIFE.
...FOR THE ARRIVAL OF A DRAGON KNIGHT TO SAVE THEM.
EVERYONE HAS BEEN WAITING WITH BATED BREATH...
I HAD NO IDEA THE DAMAGE TO YOUR LANDS WAS SO BAD.

EUSIS!
LOT, YOU TRULY ARE A NOBLE IF YOU CAN SAY THINGS LIKE THAT.
WHAT IN THE NAME OF ALL THE STARS DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH ANYTHING?
YOUR BLOOD IS AS BLUE AS MINE!
IF YOU INSIST ON TRYING TO DESTROY EVERY MEAT-EATING DRAGON IN THE PROVINCE...
...THEN YOU REALLY WILL GET YOURSELF KILLED!
BEING NAMED "DRAGON KNIGHT" IS NOTHING MORE THAN A POLITICAL PLOY IN THE SUCCESSION WARS! YOU'RE HERE TO MAKE YOUR SISTER LOOK GOOD, THAT'S ALL.
HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND?!
EVEN STUPIDITY HAS ITS LIMITS!
PERHAPS.
BUT, EVER SINCE I WAS A LITTLE BOY...
...I'VE KNOWN THAT I AM NOT TRULY CUT OUT TO BE A NOBLE.

I SNUCK OUT OF PARTIES AS A CHILD.
THE ATMOSPHERE OF THOSE PARTIES STIFLED ME.
I HATED THE POLITE CONVER-SATIONS...
...AIMED AT UNCOV-ERING AND EXPLOITING THE OTHER'S WEAKNESSES.
LIKE A FISH THAT COULDN'T STAND TO SWIM, I WOULD ESCAPE THE PARTY'S GLITTERING AQUARIUM AS SOON AS I COULD.
FIRIEL...
...YOU WERE THE ONLY ONE.
I NEVER TRIED TO EXPLAIN THAT FEELING TO ANYONE BUT YOU...
...BECAUSE I KNEW YOU WOULD UNDERSTAND.

"EUSIS..."
"I'D LIKE FOR YOU TO FORGET THERE EVER WAS TALK ABOUT ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN THE TWO OF US."
"I'VE FINALLY REALIZED SOMETHING."
"THE ONE I WANT TO PROTECT, THE ONE I LOVE... IS RUNE."
"WITHOUT HIM HERE BY MY SIDE..."
"...THERE'S NO POINT IN ME TRYING TO FIND SAFETY IN THE COURT."
RU--

IGRAINE!
LADY MARGOT, THE COUNTESS OF RUALGO, ORDERED ME TO SERVE AS YOUR BODYGUARD.
MY THANKS FOR THE WARM WELCOME, FIRIEL.
I WILL BE ACCOMPANY-ING YOU ON YOUR JOURNEY TO KAGWELL.

A VILLAGE UP AHEAD.
OH, LOOK.
SO THE WRITER EVANGELINE IS REALLY YOUR COUSIN ADALE.
I SEE...

IT SEEMS WE WILL HAVE A PROPER MEAL IN OUR TUMMIES AND A STURDY ROOF OVER OUR HEADS TONIGHT.

WELCOME!

NO!! WE CAN'T STAY AT AN INN! ANYWHERE BUT AN INN!!
OH? WHY NOT?
UM... WELL... UH...

WAIT A MINUTE...
I'VE SEEN YOUR FACE BEFORE...
WE'D LIKE A ROOM FOR THE NIGHT, AND A MEAL...
RIGHT-O!
AREN'T YOU THE TALL KNIGHT, MA'AM. OH, AND YOU HAVE SUCH A LOVELY COMPANION!
WHY ARE YOU HOLDING YOUR HAT TO YOUR HEAD LIKE THAT?
SHH!
...OH, I REMEMBER!! YOU'RE THIS GIRL!
A WANTED FLYER?
SEE! IT LOOKS EXACTLY LIKE HER!
WHAT? "THE BRONZE-HAIRED MAIDEN" IS HERE?!
SHE REALLY IS DRESSED UP LIKE A BOY SO THAT SHE CAN FOLLOW HIS LORDSHIP!
ガタン
HEY, EVERYONE!! IT'S THE BRONZE-HAIRED MAIDEN!

SOMEBODY IS PASSING OUT A HUGE NUMBER OF THOSE FLYERS...
...AND MINSTRELS ARE SINGING ROMANTIC BALLADS ABOUT THE "BRONZE-HAIRED MAIDEN" AND HER "BELOVED" DRAGON KNIGHT...
...SO I'VE BEEN STUCK CAMPING OUT EVERY NIGHT, JUST SO I CAN AVOID ALL THIS FUSS IN EVERY TOWN!
FIRIEL, WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?!
I DON'T KNOW! BUT IT HAPPENS IN EVERY TOWN!
わら
わら
WOW! SHE'S JUST AS BEAUTIFUL AS THE RUMORS SAID!
INNKEEP, IS SHE THE REAL THING?
HOW BRAVE! HER BETROTHED IS THE DRAGON KNIGHT, ORDERED BY STAR QUEEN ASTRAEA HERSELF TO DESTROY THE DRAGONS, SO SHE DRESSED AS A BOY AND SNUCK OUT OF THE PALACE TO FOLLOW HIM AND PROTECT HIM!
わら
THE BALLADS ALL SAY IT'S A WONDERFUL SHADE OF BRONZE THAT SHIMMERS LIKE THE SUN ITSELF!
PLEASE?
MAIDEN, COULD YOU SHOW US YOUR HAIR?
PLEASE?
HEY, EVERY-BODY...

...OUR JOURNEY IS SUPPOSED TO BE A SECRET.
オオ!
THE DRAGON KNIGHT AND HIS RETINUE...
...MUST NEVER KNOW WE WERE HERE-- IT WOULD CAUSE THEM NOTHING BUT WORRY.
HE MUST BE THE HAPPIEST MAN ALIVE...
...WHAT WITH A GIRL LIKE YOU FOR A BRIDE!
DON'T YOU WORRY ONE BIT, DEARIE! NONE OF US WILL SAY A WORD!

OH NO...
IGRAINE LOOKS FURIOUS!
BUT WE'RE NOT ENGAGED!
HOW DID YOU COME TO SOMETHING LIKE THIS?
FIRIEL, I HADN'T THE SLIGHTEST IDEA YOU HAD DECIDED TO UNDERTAKE THIS JOURNEY JUST SO THAT YOU COULD CHASE AFTER YOUR BETROTHED.
AND I'M NOT GOING SOUTH FOR SUCH A FLUFF-BRAINED REASON!
THE ONLY PART THAT'S TRUE IS MY WANTING TO PROTECT EUSIS, AND THAT'S BECAUSE I PROMISED ADALE!
WELL, SHE HAS REASON, I GUESS.
SHE IS A PROPER LADY, AFTER ALL. I MUST LOOK LIKE A HORRIBLY LOOSE GIRL TO HER, SINCE I LET THESE WILD RUMORS ABOUT ME FLY AROUND.
THE WIND WILL BLOW STRONG TONIGHT.
LET'S REST.

ギッ…
HUH...
YOU, BEING BETROTHED TO A MAN.
THAT SURPRISED ME, FIRIEL. IT SURPRISED ME VERY MUCH.
ヒュ

FIRIEL, DID YOU HEAR SOME-THING?
F-I-R-I-E-L!!
"GOOD BYE..."

I ADMIT I WAS NEVER VERY GOOD AT DOING WHAT NOBLE LADIES SHOULD...
...BUT CHOPPING WOOD AND HAULING WATER ARE THINGS I'VE BEEN DOING SINCE I WAS LITTLE.
YOU HARDLY LOOK THE INEPT ROYAL PRINCESS.
HA HA HA! DON'T BE SILLY, IGRAINE!
I WAS A FISH OUT OF WATER IN THE ROYAL COURT. THIS JOURNEY IS A LOT CLOSER TO THE LIFE I'M USED TO!
FIRIEL, YOU...
THERE'S... SOMETHING DIFFERENT TO HER SMILE THAN WHEN WE WERE AT THE ACADEMY TOGETHER.
I KNEW IT. SOMETHING'S CHANGED.

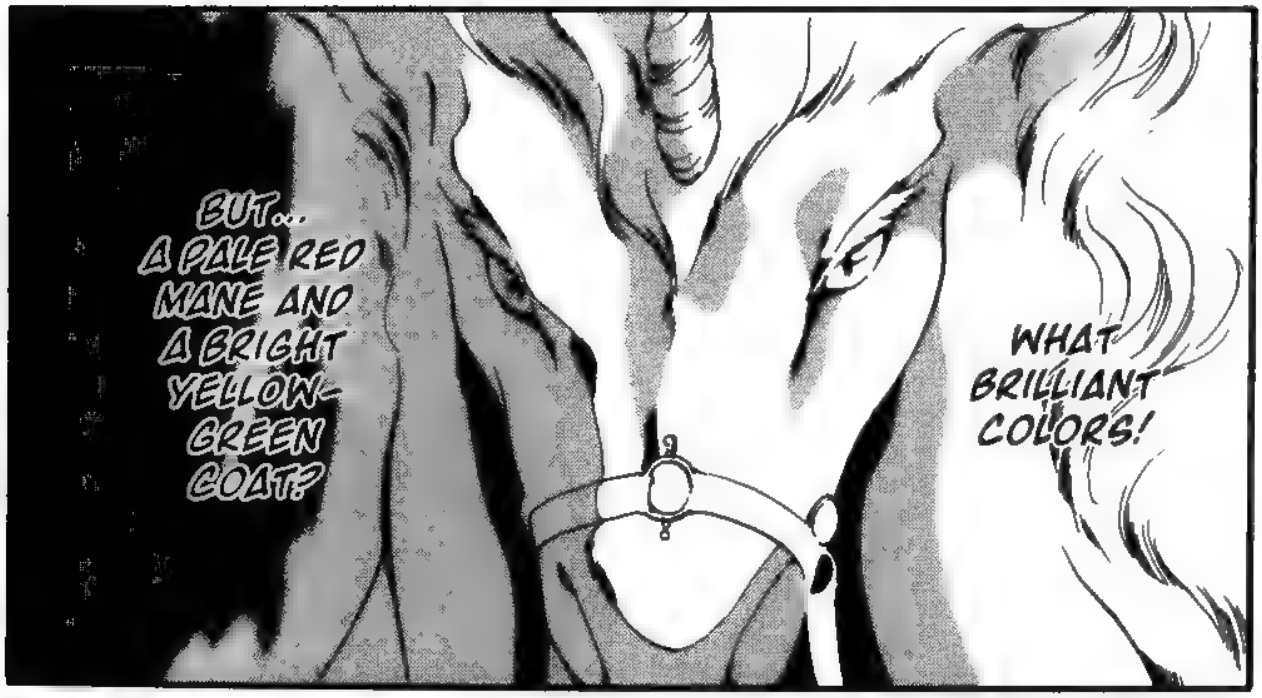
Squeal
!
STARS!
WHAT WAS THAT SQUEAL?!
YOU EXPRESS FEELINGS I'VE NEVER SEEN IN YOU BEFORE.

IT'S NOT A BIRD, DESPITE ITS PEEPING...
I DON'T KNOW.
Squee!
WHAT'S THIS? A SHEEP? A DOG?
Squee!
...AND IT DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE A GOAT. I SUGGEST WE LEAVE IT BE. IT MIGHT BITE.
SQUEE!
SQUEE! SQUEE!
SQUEEP!
KYA!!
HUH?

YOU THERE! WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?!
THESE LANDS ARE THE PRIVATE RESERVE OF DUKE GILVIA.
NO ONE IS ALLOWED INSIDE THE UNICORN FOREST WITHOUT EXPRESS PERMISSION FROM THE DUKE HIMSELF!
NOW, LET THAT FOAL GO.
OH MY GOSH...!

WHO ARE YOU?
BE WARNED. DEPENDING ON YOUR ANSWER, I MAY NOT ALLOW YOU TO LEAVE THIS FOREST ALIVE.

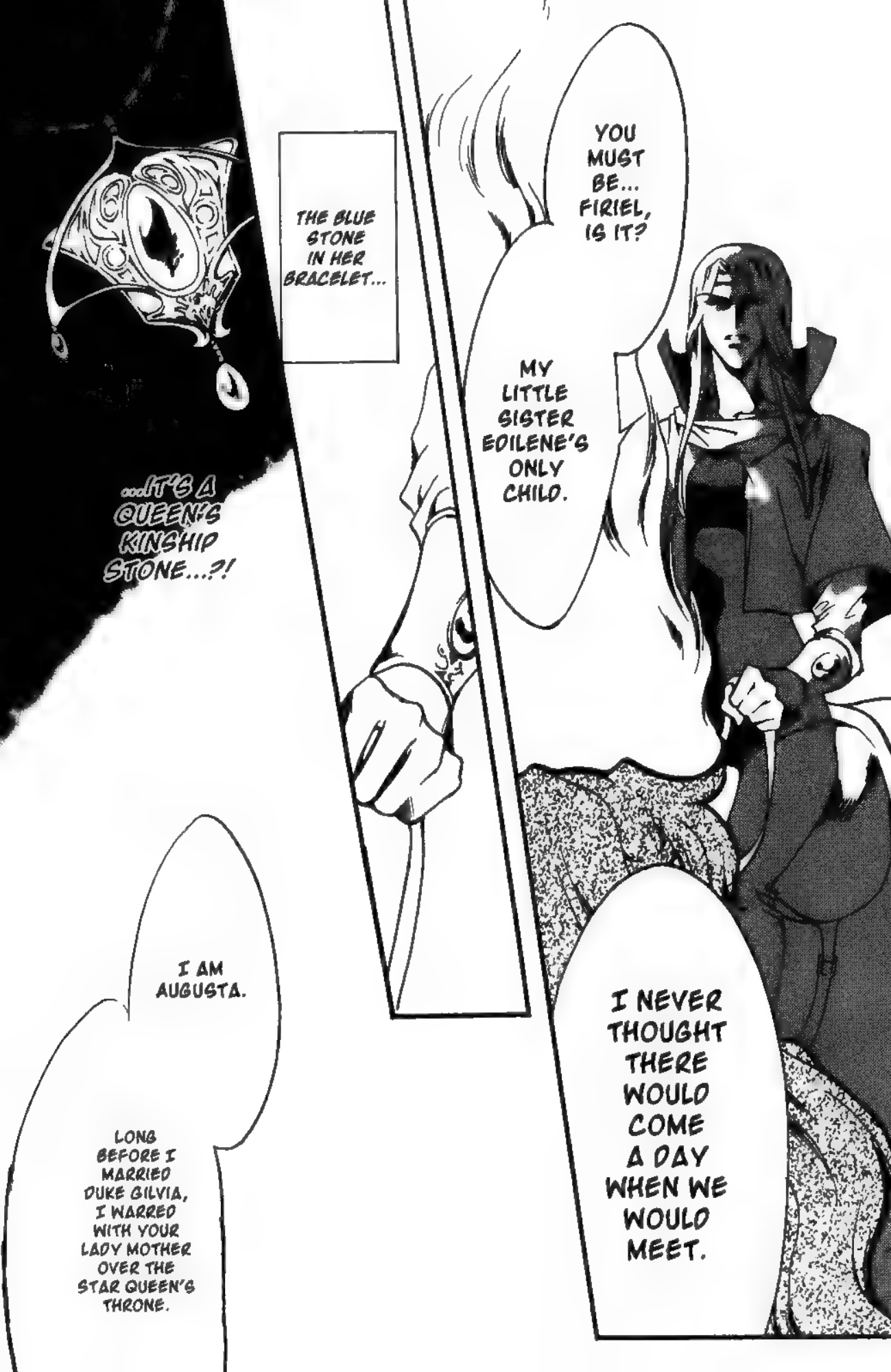
Chapter 22: The Key to the World


BUT... A PALE RED MANE AND A BRIGHT YELLOW-GREEN COAT?
WHAT BRILLIANT COLORS!

NO NORMAL HORSE HAS THAT KIND OF COLORATION!

IF YOU HAVE COME IN SEARCH OF SECRETS TO STEAL ...
...THIS HORN HOLDS NO MERCY FOR YOU.
FIRIEL!
SQUEE!

SQUEE SQUEE!
SQUEE!
SQUEE!
SQUEE!
NO, STAY BACK!
YOU'LL GET HURT!!
UNBELIEV-ABLE.


THE BLUE STONE IN HER BRACELET...
...IT'S A QUEEN'S KINSHIP STONE...?!
YOU MUST BE... FIRIEL, IS IT?
MY LITTLE SISTER EDILENE'S ONLY CHILD.
I NEVER THOUGHT THERE WOULD COME A DAY WHEN WE WOULD MEET.
I AM AUGUSTA.
LONG BEFORE I MARRIED DUKE GILVIA, I WARRED WITH YOUR LADY MOTHER OVER THE STAR QUEEN'S THRONE.

YES.
THIS CERTAINLY IS THE OFFICIAL SEAL OF LADY MARGOT, COUNTESS OF RUALGO.

THANK YOU, YOUR LADYSHIP!
UM... MAY I ASK A QUESTION?
DO ALL UNICORNS HAVE SUCH UNUSUAL COLORS AS THE ONE YOU WERE RIDING?

IT WILL BE NEXT MONTH AT LEAST BEFORE HE IS ABLE TO PROPERLY RIDE A UNICORN.
ASKING YOU TO CAMP OUTSIDE THE ENTIRE TIME WOULD BE UNTHINK-ABLE.

VERY WELL. I HUMBLY WELCOME YOU INTO THE CASTLE AS OFFICIAL GUESTS OF THE DUKE.
I WILL ARRANGE FOR ROOMS TO BE PREPARED FOR YOU IN THE WEST WING...
...OPPOSITE OF THE EAST WING, WHERE THE DRAGON KNIGHT AND HIS RETINUE ARE STAYING.

SO THIS IS MY AUNT.

SHE DOESN'T MUCH LOOK LIKE THE ADORABLE ADALE...
...OR THE VOLUPTUOUS LEANDRA...
...BUT SHE IS THE TRUE MOTHER OF BOTH.
YES, THEY DO.
THE ONE I WAS RIDING PREVIOUSLY WAS CHARTREUSE...
...BUT OTHERS ARE PINK, BLUE, EVEN YELLOW.
UNICORNS CAN COME IN MORE COLORS THAN THE RAINBOW.
OH, OKAY. SO THEN, IS THE LITTLE GRAY CREATURE I FOUND A BABY UNICORN?
YES. YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW RARE A SIGHT YOU HAVE SEEN.
UNICORNS FOAL VERY, VERY RARELY.
ALL FOALS ARE BORN GRAY.
WATCHING THAT GREY COAT SLOWLY SHED OUT TO REVEAL THEIR TRUE ADULT COLOR IS ONE OF THE MANY PLEASURES OF RAISING UNICORNS.
OH MY...!
SHE SMILED!

WHAT A SURPRISE!
I NEVER WOULD'VE GUESSED THAT UNICORNS REALLY EXISTED!
I WONDER WHY NO ONE ELSE KNOWS.
YES. I'M ALSO QUITE SHOCKED THEY'RE NOT SIMPLY SOME FAIRYTALE.
ISN'T IT ODD THAT, WHENEVER WE COME ACROSS SOME TIDBIT OF INFORMATION THAT IS OBVIOUSLY BEING INTENTIONALLY HIDDEN, IT SEEMS THAT THAT INFORMATION IS SOMEHOW TIED TO HERESY?
TRUTH BE TOLD, THAT IS SOMETHING I HAVE BEEN PONDERING SINCE I WAS IN THE ACADEMY.
.....

I WOULD SAY IT IS SAFE TO GUESS THAT UNICORNS MUST BE ONE OF THE MOST CLOSELY GUARDED SECRETS IN THE ENTIRE WORLD.
...YET NOT EVEN COURT NOBLES, WHOSE LIPS FLAP SECRETS FASTER THAN A BIRD'S WINGS, KNOW THAT A DRAGON KNIGHT MUST RIDE A UNICORN. THEY DO NOT EVEN REALIZE UNICORNS EXIST!
THIS CASE IS EVEN ODDER. ANYONE CAN TELL YOU ALL ABOUT DRAGON KNIGHTS, WHEN THEY LIVED AND WHAT THEY DID...
HERESY?!
AND SO, IT IS BEST THAT WE DO NOT PRY ANY FURTHER INTO THE MATTER.
"IF YOU HAVE COME IN SEARCH OF SECRETS TO STEAL..."
"...THIS HORN HOLDS NO MERCY FOR YOU."
THERE ARE A LOT OF THINGS LABELED "HERESY" THAT ARE STRICTLY KEPT FROM THE MASSES...
...YET ARE QUIETLY KNOWN OR PRACTICED AMONG THE COURT NOBLES AS STATUS SYMBOLS.
LIKE ROSES.

I-IGRAINE ...!
NO... I...ER...
TAKING A WALK AT THIS TIME OF NIGHT?
AND YOU, IGRAINE?
I WANTED TO SEE THE BABY UNICORN, BUT...
WHY ARE YOU UP?
COULDN'T YOU SLEEP, EITHER?
FIRIEL.
YEEP!!

I AM ACCOMPANYING YOU ON THIS JOURNEY AS YOUR PERSONAL KNIGHT.
FIRIEL, THERE IS SOMETHING I WOULD LIKE YOU TO UNDERSTAND
.....
WITH A PRINCESS TO PROTECT LYING BY MY SIDE, I...
...AS YOUR KNIGHT...
...CANNOT POSSIBLY SLEEP DEEPLY.
.....
BUT IGRAINE... YOU'RE A GIRL...!

I THINK THE UNICORNS' STABLE IS THIS WAY.
SQUEEP!!♫

SQUEE!
IT CAME RUNNING STRAIGHT TO YOU.
IT'S SO WARM...
IT SEEMS I WAS TOO LATE.

THAT LITTLE ONE HAS IMPRINTED ON YOU. TO HIM, YOU ARE HIS MASTER.
HUH? HE WON'T LISTEN TO ANYONE ELSE? HE WON'T EVEN REALLY LIKE THEM?
WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?!
THE SECOND MONTH AFTER THEIR BIRTH...
...THEY ARE SEPARATED FROM THEIR MOTHERS AND TAUGHT WHO THEIR HUMAN MASTER IS.
IN ORDER TO BE ACCEPTED BY A UNICORN FOAL, THE PERSON MUST, WITHOUT FAIL, BE WEARING ONE PARTICULAR ITEM...
...THIS.

AND YOU...
...ARE WEARING SOMETHING SIMILAR TO THIS, YES?
A QUEEN'S KINSHIP STONE!
WHAT ?!
ARE YOU SAYING THAT A QUEEN'S KINSHIP STONE HAS THE POWER TO BIND UNICORNS?!
UNI-CORNS ...
...ARE BORN AND LIVE SOLELY FOR THE STAR QUEEN'S SAKE.
はぁ
YET, LIFE DOES SEEM TO LOVE BETRAYING ONE'S EXPECT-ATIONS.
I HAD INTENDED TO ENTRUST BOTH MY BRACELET AND THIS FOAL TO THE FIRST QUEEN-IN-WAITING TO VISIT ME HERE.
はぁはぁ
KNOWING THE SECRETS OF THE UNICORNS IS TO HOLD THE KEY TO THE WORLD IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND, AFTER ALL.
HOWEVER IT WAS NEITHER ADALE NOR LEANDRA WHO CAME, BUT YOU. AND YOU ARE THE ONE WHO HAS RECEIVED THE UNICORN.
THANKS TO THAT, THE FATE OF THE WORLD HAS ONCE AGAIN BECOME SHROUDED IN MYSTERY.
UNICORNS ARE...THE KEY TO THE WORLD?!

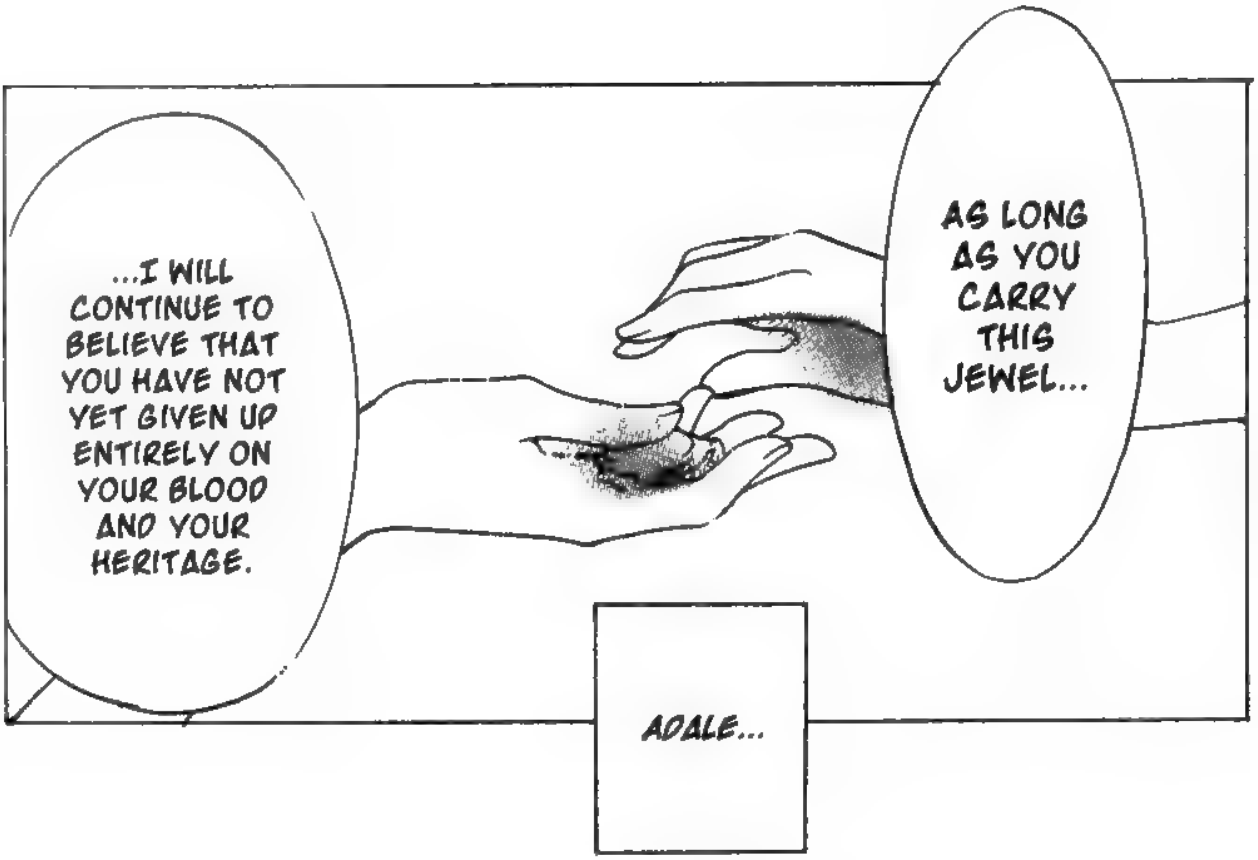
I CANNOT TELL YOU MORE. ONLY THE WOMAN WHO WILL BECOME THE STAR QUEEN MAY KNOW THE REST.

NGK
...
STARS AND SKY ABOVE, I'M SHOCKED HE CAN KEEP TRYING AND TRYING LIKE THAT.
IT'S A SAFE BET TO SAY THAT NO ONE LOOKING AT HIM NOW BELIEVES HE'S THE NEXT COUNT OF RUALGO.
I HEARD HE STARTED SLEEPING IN THE STABLE WITH THEM LAST NIGHT.
EUGIS COULDN'T EVEN GET WITHIN FIVE PACES OF THEM FOR THE FIRST TWO DAYS, THOUGH.
BUT BREAK THAT CONFOUNDED ARTHUR, AND THE MARES WILL FOLLOW, TOO.
TRULY, MY LORD. THIS IS, WHAT, THE FOURTH DAY OF THIS?

AH, WELL. NOTHING TO BE DONE ABOUT IT, MY LORD.
BEFORE ONE CAN HUNT DRAGONS, ONE MUST FIRST CONTROL A UNICORN ENOUGH TO RIDE IT.
REGULAR HORSES WON'T DO, AS EVEN THE STOUTEST WARHORSE WILL TURN TAIL AND RUN AT THE FIRST WHIFF OF DRAGON SCENT.
EXACTLY.
HAS HE--?!
AND SINCE WE ALL NEED A UNICORN...
...THERE'S NOTHING FOR IT BUT FOR EUSIS TO RIDE THE HERD'S LEADER, THE STALLION, FIRST.
UNH!

EUSIS!
"PLEASE, TAKE THIS WITH YOU. IT BELONGS TO YOU."
"FIRIEL..."
...IF YOU REFUSE THIS, YOU'RE TELLING ME YOU'RE NEVER COMING BACK.
FIRIEL, YOU KNOW ...
I COULDN'T POSSIBLY TAKE SOMETHING SO PRECIOUS WITH ME ON THIS KIND OF JOURNEY.
I'M GOING TO THE DRAGON FOREST, NOT SOME OTHER CASTLE!
ADALE, NO!
THE QUEEN'S KINSHIP STONE?

ADALE...
I CANNOT BE FREE, AS YOU ARE. I CANNOT LEAVE HIERAGLION.
IF YOU HAVE EVEN THE SLIGHTEST LOVE FOR ME, PLEASE TAKE THE NECKLACE WITH YOU, AS A MEMENTO.
YOU HAVE ALWAYS BEEN LIKE THE WIND.
NO ONE CAN STOP YOU FROM GOING WHERE YOU WISH.
YOU HAVE ALWAYS BEEN ONE TO LIVE EXACTLY HOW YOU PLEASE.
AND THAT IS PRECISELY WHAT I LOVE ABOUT YOU.
EVEN IF WE NEVER MEET AGAIN...
...PLEASE DON'T FORGET THAT YOU WILL ALWAYS BE IN MY HEART.


...I WILL CONTINUE TO BELIEVE THAT YOU HAVE NOT YET GIVEN UP ENTIRELY ON YOUR BLOOD AND YOUR HERITAGE.
AS LONG AS YOU CARRY THIS JEWEL...
ADALE...

WHAT, IN THE NAME OF ALL THE STARS IN HEAVEN, IS THAT DOING HERE?!
WELL, WE DON'T REALLY HAVE A CHOICE, RIGHT?
LADY AUGUSTA SAID HE'LL NEVER REALLY LIKE ANYBODY BUT ME, SO IT'D BE TOO CRUEL TO LEAVE HIM.
YOU INTEND TO TAKE IT WITH US?! THAT BOTTOMLESS PIT?!
...
ZZZ

SEE?! SEE?! THAT UGLY, UNNATURALLY HUGE MOUTH IS JUST FULL OF FANGS!
Yawn.
HOW DISGUSTING!
I DON'T THINK I WILL EVER BE ABLE TO LIKE UNICORNS!
HE EATS ANYTHING! EVEN SNAKES AND SPIDERS AND OTHER NASTY THINGS THAT COULD HURT US!
IT'S NOT SO BAD!
YOU MUST HAVE YOUR OWN SPECIAL DEFINITION OF CUTE, THEN!
ONCE YOU GET USED TO HIM, HE'S ACTUALLY REALLY CUTE.
IT'S ONLY SCARY AT FIRST.
I'M THE ONLY ONE WHO THINKS YOU'RE CUTE, THOUGH. THAT PART'S DIFFERENT.
...AND YOU'LL ONLY EVER LIKE ME.
A LITTLE VIOLENT...
A LITTLE CRAZY...
...A HUGE EATER...
YOU KNOW, YOU'RE AN AWFUL LOT LIKE...
...SOMEONE ELSE I KNOW.

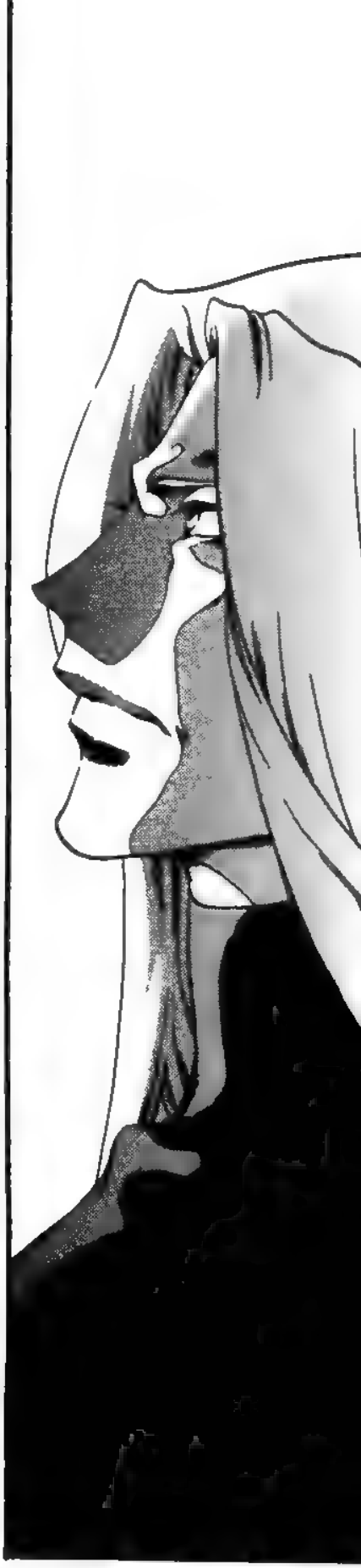
I HEARD THAT YOUNG LORD ROLAND HAS FINALLY MANAGED TO RIDE THE UNICORN.
OH, BY THE BY, THERE IS SOME GOOD NEWS.
DID THAT ONE FINALLY KILL HIM?
OH, STARS HELP ME!
ARGH...!
ブルル…

HE DID IT. BY ALL THE STARS IN THE HEAVENS, HE FINALLY DID IT!
Twee!

I HEARD THAT UNICORNS DO NOT EASILY ACCEPT BEING RIDDEN.
WHICH IS WHY IT WAS SO WORRISOME THAT EUSIS CHOSE THE STALLION, THE MOST TEMPERA-MENTAL OF THEM ALL.
EVERYONE WILL BE READY TO LEAVE THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW.
SINCE THEIR LEADER HAS ACCEPTED A HUMAN RIDER, THE UNICORN MARES ARE LETTING LORD LOT AND THE OTHERS RIDE THEM WITHOUT A FUSS.
THAT'S AMAZING! I'M SO GLAD FOR HIM!

THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW. THEN WE CAN FINALLY CONTINUE OUR JOURNEY TO THE SOUTH, WHERE DRAGONS ROAM!
"THOUGH THEY MAY LOOK LIKE HORSES, UNICORNS ARE FAR MORE LIKE DRAGONS."
"HOWEVER, THEY CANNOT BREED IN THE WILD."
YES. SHE IS SUCH AN UNUSUAL PERSON.
I GET THE FEELING THAT SHE LIVES ONLY FOR UNICORNS.
"KEY TO THE WORLD," HUH?
"THERE IS ONE MORE THING I MUST TELL YOU."
I NEVER EXPECTED THAT LADY AUGUSTA HERSELF WOULD COME TO SEE US OFF.

"ONCE A UNICORN LEAVES THIS CASTLE, IT WILL NEVER BEAR ANY OFFSPRING."
"WHEN YOU TAKE THAT LITTLE ONE WITH YOU, HE WILL ONLY EVER HAVE YOU TO RELY UPON..."
"...SO PLEASE, TAKE GOOD CARE OF HIM."
LADY AUGUSTA IS NOT THE ONLY UNUGUAL THING.
UNICORNS CAN ONLY EVER BEAR OFFSPRING AT THAT ONE CASTLE. THEY DO NOT EVEN EXIST IN THE WILD.
DON'T YOU FIND THAT A LITTLE UNNATURAL ...?
I THINK...
...THAT THE LADY AUGUSTA, AND THAT CASTLE, HIDE DEEPER SECRETS THAN WE WILL EVER KNOW.



Chapter 23: The Dragon Knight and the Maiden

I DIDN'T KNOW THAT KAGWELL'S CAPITAL CITY OF KEILON COULD EVEN HOLD SUCH SLUMS.
WHAT HORRIBLE CONDITIONS.
NO, WAIT. THESE PEOPLE MUST BE ONES WHO LOST THEIR HOMES TO RAMPAGING DRAGONS.

AAA...
THEN EVERYONE HERE MUST BE A REFUGEE. SO MANY...!
MR. DRAGON KNIGHT, SIR!
PLEASE DRIVE ALL THOSE TERRIBLE DRAGONS AWAY! PLEASE MAKE THEM LEAVE MY VILLAGE!
I WANNA GO HOME!!
HERE, BOY! STAY BACK!

DON'T WORRY.
I WILL TAKE CARE OF ALL THE DRAGONS, I PROMISE.
THAT'S WHAT I CAME HERE TO DO.
YOU WILL? THANKS!
Sigh...
WHEN WILL WE EVER GET TO RETURN TO HIERAGLION? I SO LONG TO GO HOME.

WHAT?! WHAT DO YOU MEAN I HAVE TO HELP HUNT FOR THE UNICORNS' FODDER?!
BECAUSE WE SHARED WITH THE CHILDREN, WE HAVE TO SUPPLEMENT OUR RATIONS WITH HUNTING.
AND THEY ARE OUR UNICORNS. IT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO CARE FOR THEM.
EUSIS, BEING YOUR FRIEND HASN'T DONE MUCH FOR ME, YOU KNOW THAT?!
HA HA HA!
DON'T GET SO RUFFLED, LOT! BESIDES, IT HAS BEEN QUITE SOME TIME SINCE WE HAVE HAD A CHANCE TO USE OUR BOWS. I THINK WE ARE IN SORE NEED OF THE PRACTICE!
NOW JUST HOLD STILL...
FOUND YOU.

SQUEE

RU--!!
FIRIEL?!

Um... Um...
FIRIEL?!
WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?!
SO YOU THOUGHT YOU'D FEED YOUR UNICORNS THEIR OWN YOUNG FOR DINNER?!
I-I WAS JUST...
...ER... HUNTING. FOR FOOD FOR THE UNICORNS.

DRAGON KNIGHTS' ENCAMPMENT
SO, SHE TRULY IS SO SMITTEN WITH LORD EUSIS THAT SHE RISKED HER LIFE TO JOURNEY ALL THE WAY HERE, TO THE SOUTHERN EDGE OF THE WORLD?
SHE REALLY DID COME! JUST LIKE THE BALLAD SAID!
INCRED-IBLE!
"ROMANTIC"? NOT BY A LONG SHOT...
THAT'S SO ROMANTIC!!
THE BRONZE-HAIRED MAIDEN IS HERE?!
ARE THEY IN HIS LORDSHIP'S TENT, HAVING AN EMOTIONAL, TEAR-FILLED REUNION?
That's so wonderful...
HAS SHE GONE TO SEE HIS LORDSHIP YET?

HONESTLY, FIRIEL.
I HAVEN'T THE FAINTEST IDEA WHAT YOU WERE THINKING, COMING ALL THE WAY DOWN HERE.
UNLIKE EVERYONE ELSE, I'M SURE IT'S NOT FOR THE REASONS THEY SING IN THE BALLADS.
THOUGH I ALMOST WISH IT WERE...
...I KNOW DIFFERENTLY. YOU DIDN'T COME ALL THIS WAY OUT OF LOVE FOR ME.

"...THE ONE I LOVE IS RUNE..."
TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH...
...I DON'T THINK I REALLY KNOW, EITHER.
BUT I DO KNOW THIS.
OF ALL THE THINGS I'VE LEARNED RECENTLY ...
...A WHOLE LOT OF THEM ARE POINTING SOUTH.
"KNOWING THE SECRETS OF THE UNICORNS..."
THIS IS WHERE EDILENE AND PROFESSOR DEE FLED TO.
"... IS TO HOLD THE KEY TO THE WORLD IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND."
SINCE I CAN'T FIND OUT ANY MORE ABOUT THAT AT THE PALACE...
...I THOUGHT I'D COME SOUTH AND TAKE A LOOK FOR MYSELF, TO SEE IF I COULD FIND OUT WHAT IT WAS THEY WERE LOOKING FOR.

I MEAN...
IT'S NOT LIKE I HAVE ANYTHING ELSE TO DO. THE ONE THING I WANTED TO PROTECT IS GONE...
!
WHEN WE FIRST MET, AT THE BALL...
...I REMEMBER YOU HAVING A VERY SIMILAR EXPRESSION ON YOUR FACE.

YOU JUST STOOD THERE...
...ALL ALONE IN THE GREAT HALL.
I DIDN'T EVEN THINK...
MISS FIRIEL DEE...
...WOULD YOU SHARE THIS DANCE WITH ME?
...I JUST REACHED OUT MY HAND TO YOU.
WITHOUT RUNE BY YOUR SIDE, YOU ALWAYS LOOK A LITTLE LOST...
"IT WAS OBVIOUS AT A GLANCE THAT YOU HADN'T THE SLIGHTEST IDEA WHAT TO DO WITH YOURSELF.

WELL THEN, IF YOU HAVEN'T ANYWHERE ELSE TO BE, THEN WHY DON'T YOU STAY WITH US?
HAVING YOU NEARBY WILL DO WONDERS FOR THE SOLDIERS' MORALE.
AND IF YOU SHOULD LIKE TO SEE A DRAGON, LET ME KNOW. I WILL BE SURE TO KEEP YOU SAFE.

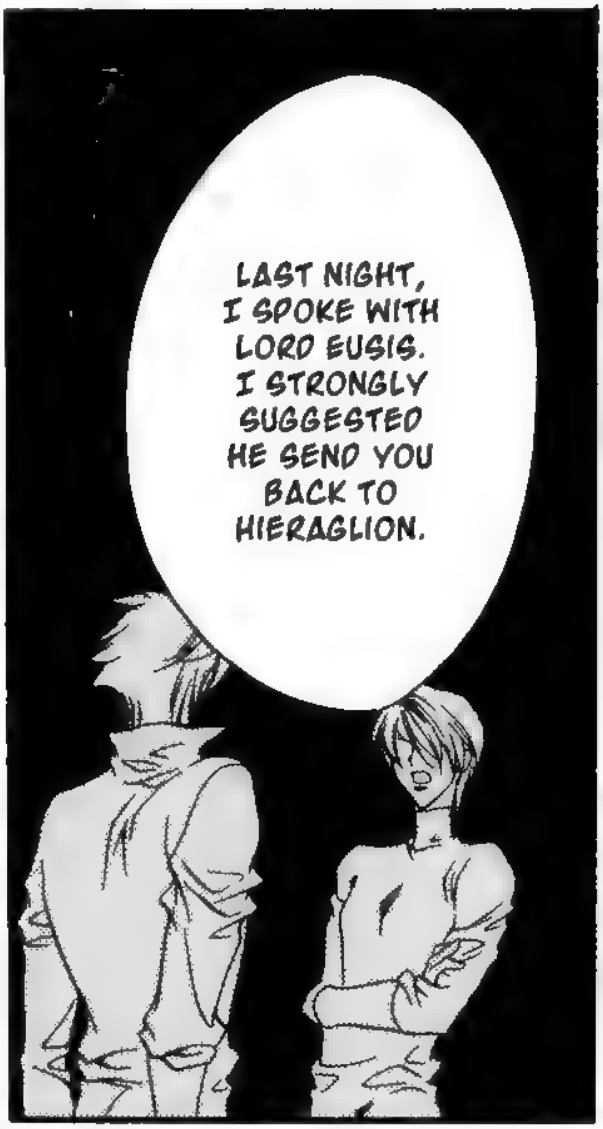
IF I MAY HAVE A MOMENT OF YOUR TIME? I WOULD LIKE TO SPEAK TO YOU ABOUT FIRIEL.

!!?!!
LORD EUSIS.

SOL-
DIERS!!
FOR-
WARD!!
SO THOSE
ARE REAL
DRAGONS...!

Chapter 24: Reunion

SO NOW EUSIS AND THE OTHER KNIGHTS ARE GOING TO RIDE THEIR UNICORNS AND DRIVE THE DRAGONS BACK INTO THE JUNGLE, RIGHT?
ガよっ
HMM... IT LOOKS LIKE THERE ARE ONLY THE DOCILE PLANT-EATERS DOWN THERE.
IGRAINE...?
FIRIEL...


LAST NIGHT, I SPOKE WITH LORD EUSIS. I STRONGLY SUGGESTED HE SEND YOU BACK TO HIERAGLION.

FIRIEL, WAKE UP!
I CAN'T GO BACK NOW!
WHAT?! WHAT DID YOU DO THAT FOR?!
THAT IS NOT THE TRUE REASON YOU CAME SOUTH!
IF I DID, I WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO KEEP MY PROMISE TO ADALE! I SWORE TO HER I'D PROTECT EUSIS!

YOU'RE NOT LOOKING TO PROTECT ANYONE, YOU'RE JUST LOOKING TO DIE!!
I DON'T THINK YOU CAN-- BECAUSE IT'S THE TRUTH!
CAN YOU DENY IT?
YOU CAME HERE SEARCHING FOR A PLACE TO THROW AWAY YOUR LIFE.

WORRIED ABOUT THE LADIES, EUSIS?
LOT.
NORMAL LADIES ALMOST FAINT IN FEAR AT THE VERY MENTION OF THE WORD "DRAGON."
WANTING TO SEE A DRAGON...!
I MUST SAY, THAT IS ONE BRAVE, DETERMINED LITTLE PRINCESS.
HOWEVER, THAT DOES MAKE HER A FITTING CONSORT FOR A DRAGON KNIGHT. IN THE BALLADS, OF COURSE...
FIRIEL WANTS TO DIE?

ALL THROUGH OUR JOURNEY, I HAD AN UNEASY FEELING THAT SOMETHING WAS TERRIBLY WRONG...
...THAT FIRIEL WAS IN INCREDIBLE DANGER.
I DON'T THINK SHE HERSELF REALIZES THIS YET...
...BUT I KNOW IT'S TRUE.
YES, MY LORD. HOWEVER, SHE IS NOT THE SORT OF PERSON TO SIMPLY LAY DOWN AND DIE.
PLEASE DON'T TAKE THIS THE WRONG WAY, BUT I FIND THAT HARD TO BELIEVE.
THE FIRIEL I KNOW HAS ALWAYS BEEN A VIBRANT AND LIVELY GIRL. I ALWAYS THOUGHT IT WAS AS IF SHE WERE LIFE ITSELF GIVEN FORM.
I THOUGHT THE SAME THING, MY LORD.
WHEN WE BOTH ATTENDED THE TAURUS ACADEMY, SHE WAS INDESTRUCTIBLE. NO MATTER WHAT THE DIRE CIRCUMSTANCES, SHE ALWAYS OVERCAME THEM.
SHE HAD AN AURA ABOUT HER SO BRIGHT SHE COULD ALMOST OUTSHINE THE SUN.

THEN I SAW HER JUMP UNHESITATINGLY INTO THE PATH OF YOUR ARROW TO PROTECT THE BABY UNICORN.
THAT'S WHEN I KNEW FOR CERTAIN.
FIRIEL NO LONGER FEELS ANY ATTACHMENT TO HER LIFE WHATSOEVER!
"THE ONE THING I WANTED TO PROTECT IS GONE..."
WHAT ...?!

IF YOU CARE FOR HER SO MUCH AS TO PROPOSE TO HER, WHY DIDN'T YOU NOTICE SOMETHING WAS WRONG AND PROTECT HER FROM ALL THIS?!
THE GIRL SITTING OUTSIDE IS NOT THE FIRIEL I KNEW!
WHAT IN THE NAME OF ALL THE STARS COULD HAVE THROWN HER INTO DESPAIR THIS DEEP?!

"LORD BROTHER, FIRIEL IS REFUSING TO EAT."
SOME-THING LIKE THIS HAPPENED BEFORE, I BELIEVE...
...WHEN RUNE HAD BEEN KIDNAPPED BY THE SERPENT'S STAFF.
SHE DOESN'T EAT? BUT WHY ...?
FIRIEL IS A VERY SINGLE-MINDED INDIVIDUAL.
NO ONE KNOWS WHERE SIR RUNE IS, NOR WHAT TERRIBLE THINGS ARE HAPPENING TO HIM. YET HERE SHE SITS, IN SAFETY AND LUXURY.
SHE FEELS HORRIBLY GUILTY ABOUT HER COMFORTABLE CONDITION. IT TORMENTS HER HEART SO MUCH THAT IT HAS EVEN BEGUN TO POISON HER BODY.
RUNE...
WHAT AN INCREDIBLE BOND MUST EXIST BETWEEN THEM.
...LEAVING FIRIEL BEHIND MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN THE WISEST COURSE OF ACTION, EVEN THOUGH IT WAS THE ONLY WAY TO PROTECT HER AT THE TIME.

IF I HAD BEEN IN YOUR PLACE...
...I WOULD HAVE TAKEN HER WITH ME, EVEN TO THE EDGE OF THE WORLD.
"TRULY...?"
"MY LORD BROTHER, I HEARD YOU OFFICIALLY ACKNOWLEDGED YOUR BETROTHAL'S CANCELLATION."
"WHY? MY LORD, WHY MUST YOU ALWAYS BE LIKE THAT?"
"YOU LIKE FIRIEL VERY MUCH, DO YOU NOT?"
"THEN WHY MUST YOU DO SOMETHING SO RIDICULOUS AS TO BECOME A DRAGON KNIGHT?"
"YOU ALWAYS DO EVERYTHING IN YOUR POWER TO HELP HER, SO WHY NOT TELL HER THAT YOU LIVE FOR HER AND HER ONLY?"

NO...
I CANNOT DO THAT ADALE.
I STILL REMEMBER, YOU KNOW.
I HAVE NEVER ONCE FORGOTTEN WHAT HAPPENED...
...THE DAY YOU BECAME PART OF HOUSE ROLAND.
"FATHER, WHO'S THIS?"
...SHE IS YOUR LIEGE LADY, WHOM YOU SHALL PROTECT WITH YOUR LIFE.
AND ALSO, FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE...
THIS GIRL IS YOUR NEW LITTLE SISTER, EUSIS.

"DAUGHTERS BORN WITH ROYAL BLOOD HAVE NO PARENTS, NO FAMILY, NO HOUSE."
"ONE DAY, SHE WILL BE THE FOUNDATION ON WHICH ALL THE PEOPLES OF GRAAL WILL STAND. FOR THEIR SAKE, FOR GRAAL'S SAKE, SHE IS FATED TO LIVE A LIFE OF SOLITUDE."
WHAT ?!
BUT FATHER, THAT'S NOT FAIR!!
THAT'S NOT FAIR TO HER AT ALL, THE POOR THING!
YES, EUSIS.
IT'S NOT FAIR.
THAT IS WHY YOU MUST PROTECT HER.
IT IS HER FATE TO WALK A LONG, DIFFICULT AND LONELY PATH.
EQUALLY, IT IS YOUR FATE, AS THE ELDEST SON OF ROLAND, TO WALK BY HER SIDE AND KEEP HER SAFE.

...I'M THE ONLY ONE SHE HAS TO PROTECT HER.
IN ALL OF GRAAL...
I'M THE ONLY ONE.
MY LORD BROTHER...
THAT'S MY DUTY.

...HAVEN'T YOU EVER WISHED FOR FREEDOM?
FREEDOM? NO, ADALE. I DON'T NEED IT.

EVER SINCE THAT DAY...
...MY ONLY DESIRE HAS BEEN TO BECOME A KNIGHT WORTHY OF PROTECTING YOU.
THAT HAS BEEN MY SOLE REASON FOR LIVING.
"WHY DIDN'T YOU NOTICE SOMETHING WAS WRONG AND PROTECT HER FROM ALL THIS?!"
WHILE SHE IS QUITE ATTRACTIVE TO ME, I CANNOT LIVE FOR FIRIEL'S SAKE ALONE.
MY HONOR IS MY LIFE.
MY DUTY IS ME. I NEED NOTHING ELSE.
I DID NOT EVEN HAVE THE RIGHT TO TAKE HER HAND THAT NIGHT AT THE BALL, SO LONG AGO.

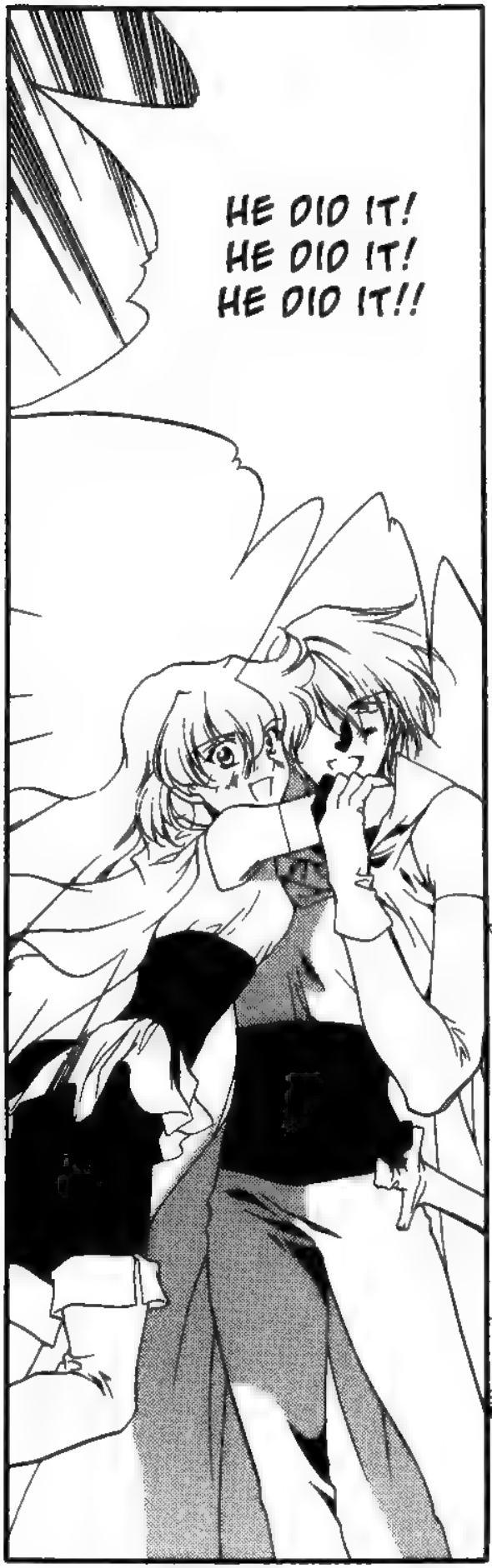
THE DRAGONS ARE ALL RUNNING AWAY FROM THE UNICORNS AND GOING BACK INTO THE FOREST!
AMAZING ...!
THEY'RE USING DRUMS TO MAKE LOUD NOISES TO STARTLE THE DRAGONS, AND THEN USING THE UNICORNS TO HERD THEM IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION.

BUT SHE'S STILL STAYING RIGHT HERE WITH ME, SO SHE CAN PROTECT ME.
AND THERE'S ADALE AND EUSIS...
SHE MUST BE SO MAD AT ME.
IGRAINE...
FIRIEL...
...I BET THEY'RE REALLY WORRIED ABOUT ME, TOO.
IS A WORLD WITHOUT RUNETTE IN IT TRULY THAT MEANINGLESS TO YOU?

IS HE TRULY THAT IMPORTANT TO YOU?

LOWER YOUR WEAPONS!
LOOK AT THEM RUN! WE DID IT, EUSIS!

ROAR


HE DID IT!
HE DID IT!
HE DID IT!!

EUSIS!!

FIRIEL, RUN!
GET DOWN OFF THERE!!

MISS FIRIEL!
ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?
YES, I'M FINE.
BUT WHAT ABOUT LITTLE MASTER RUU?
RUU!

OH! YOUR LEG! I HOPE IT'S NOT BROKEN...
ARE YOU HURT?
RUU!

FIRIEL!!
THERE WAS ANOTHER ONE?
RUN!!

THIS WAY!
HURRY!
AM I DREAMING?
WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?! COME ON!

RUNE?! IS THAT YOU?!

Chapter 25: Walls

WHY MUST YOU ALWAYS DO SUCH CRAZY THINGS?!
DO YOU TRULY WISH TO DIE THAT MUCH?!
FIRIEL! STARS ABOVE, I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU!
?
BUT THAT'S NOT THE WHOLE REASON. I KNOW THAT NOW.
I REALIZED, IN THAT ONE MOMENT...
I'D COMPLETELY LOST ALL DESIRE TO PROTECT MYSELF.
I THINK YOU MIGHT'VE BEEN RIGHT, IGRAINE, ABOUT WHY I CAME HERE.
I'M SORRY ...!
IGRAINE ...

...WHEN I WAS LOOKING DEATH IN THE EYE, THAT THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE.
I HAD A TINY LITTLE HOPE. EVERY TIME I WAS IN DANGER, I ALWAYS HAD THAT SAME LITTLE HOPE INSIDE ME.
I KNOW WHAT THAT HOPE IS NOW.
AND I KNOW...
...THAT IT'S THE MAIN REASON I MADE THIS JOURNEY SOUTH.
I HAD HOPED THAT...
...IF I WAS EVER IN TRULY LIFE-THREATENING DANGER...
...THAT RUNE WOULD COME TO SAVE ME...
...JUST LIKE HE'S ALWAYS DONE BEFORE.

SO I MADE A BET WITH FATE, AND IT LOOKS LIKE I WON.

THAT WAS BEYOND RECKLESS, FIRIEL.

RUNE.
THAT'S SUCH A STUPID IDEA I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY.
HE LOOKS A LITTLE... SKINNIER...

IF I HADN'T BEEN WHERE I WAS...
...THAT CARNIVORE WOULD HAVE SNAPPED YOU UP AND EATEN YOU IN ONE BITE.
USING YOURSELF AS BAIT IN A TRAP TO CATCH ME?

ピー

IT LOOKS LIKE YOU'VE GROWN A LITTLE...
...RUNE.
HE'S HERE.
IT'S REALLY HIM STANDING RIGHT NEXT TO ME.
THIS ISN'T A DREAM.

RUNE ...
I HAVE A LOT OF THINGS I WANT TO ASK YOU...
... BUT ...
DID YOU REALLY MURDER DUKE RIEZ?
DID YOU REALLY ACCEPT HELP FROM LEANDRA TO DO IT?
HOW DID YOU GET OUT OF THE PALACE UNNOTICED AND MAKE IT THIS FAR SOUTH?
IT'S NOT SOMETHING YOU COULD DO JUST UNDER YOUR OWN POWER.

...WE CAN TALK ABOUT ALL THAT LATER. I DON'T REALLY CARE ABOUT IT RIGHT NOW!
I MEAN, YOU'RE HERE!
YOU CAME BACK TO ME ALIVE!
ENOUGH.
Fl--

NOW GET YOUR DIRTY, HERETIC HANDS OFF OF FIRIEL!
YOU ARE A FILTHY ASSASSIN WANTED BY THE ROYAL COURT ITSELF FOR REGICIDE!
YOU ARE A FELON OF THE HIGHEST ORDER!
STEP AWAY FROM FIRIEL, RUNETTE.

IGRAINE!
THAT WAS MEAN!

IT HAS BEEN A WHILE.
NOW IT IS LORD EUGIS' DUTY TO CAPTURE RUNETTE AND TURN HIM OVER TO THE ROYAL COURT FOR TRIAL!
AND HE DRAGGED THE NAME OF HOUSE ROLAND THROUGH THE MUD BY DOING SO!
LORD EUGIS' PRESENCE IN THIS FORSAKEN, BACKWATER JUNGLE CAN BE BLAMED ENTIRELY ON HIM!
NO TO MENTION THE DISADVANTAGE ADALE NOW FACES!
NOW LET ME GO SEE RUNE!
YOU MUST NOT!
RUNETTE ASSASSINATED DUKE RIEZ, FIRIEL! YOUR OWN UNCLE!
THANK YOU, BY THE WAY...
...FOR SAVING HER.
I EXPECT YOU WOULD HAVE VANISHED THE MOMENT YOU CONFIRMED FIRIEL WAS SAFE.
...YOU WOULDN'T HAVE ALLOWED ME TO CAPTURE YOU SO DOCILELY.
IF YOU HAD ANY INTENTION OF ESCAPING...
ARE YOU SURE IT'S A WISE IDEA TO LEAVE ME UNTIED?

I...
WANTED TO APOLOGIZE TO YOU.
I DON'T PARTICULARLY CARE FOR NOBLES, AND I NEVER FELT ANYTHING LIKE GRATITUDE TOWARD HOUSE ROLAND...
...BUT I KNOW I CAUSED YOU A LOT OF PERSONAL GRIEF.
DON'T GET ME WRONG. I DON'T REGRET WHAT I DID AT ALL.
GIVEN THE SAME CHOICE ...
...I'D KILL HIM ALL OVER AGAIN.

I HAVE INFORMATION I KNOW YOU NEED.
WHAT SAY WE MAKE A DEAL, EUGIG.
RUNE
...
I...

RUNE!
EUSIS, WHERE ARE YOU TAKING HIM?
FIRIEL...
DON'T TELL ME...
TO HIERAG-LION?!
I'M NOT.
ACTUALLY, HE WILL BE GOING FURTHER SOUTH. CLOSE TO THE EQUATOR.

THIS PLANET IS ALMOST COMPLETELY CONTROLLED BY THE DRAGONS. HUMANS HAVE ONLY A FEW SMALL AREAS WHERE THEY CAN LIVE IN PEACE.
BUT DRAGONS LACK OUR INTEL-LIGENCE.
SO HOW DO THEY KNOW NOT TO COME INTO THE HUMAN AREAS?
TO THE EQUATOR?!
YES.
THERE'S SOMETHING I'VE WANTED TO KNOW FOR A LONG TIME NOW.
ONLY A VERY FEW EVER WANDER INTO OUR TOWNS, BY WHAT SEEMS TO BE A COMPLETE ACCIDENT.
AND WHY HAS THE NUMBER OF DRAGONS COMING INTO HUMAN-CONTROLLED LANDS BEEN INCREASING OF LATE?
WHY ARE DRAGONS AND HUMANS SO CONVENIENTLY SEPARATED? WHAT KEEPS THEM APART?

THE PROFESSOR HAD A THEORY ABOUT THIS. HE SAID THERE JUST MAY BE AN "INVISIBLE WALL" SOMEWHERE TO THE SOUTH.
HE SAW THE POSSIBILITY WHEN CALCULATING THE STARS' ORBITS.
PRO-FESSOR, THIS IS WEIRD!
I CALCULATED THE ORBITS FOR SOME SOUTHERN STARS AND THEY ALL GO WRONG RIGHT HERE!
RIGHT HERE...
AH, SO YOU NOTICED TOO, EH?
"IT IS ASSUMED THAT ALL THE PLANETS AND STARS WE SEE FOLLOW A SMOOTH, ELLIPTICAL ORBIT..."
"...BUT AT A CERTAIN POINT IN THE SOUTHERN SKY, ALL THOSE ORBITS SHIFT BY A SET AMOUNT."
"IT IS ALMOST AS IF, SOMEWHERE TO THE SOUTH, THERE IS A GIANT BARRIER THAT IS EVER SO SLIGHTLY CHANGING THE WAY LIGHT REACHES US."

SOMEDAY, I WOULD LIKE TO SEE IT WITH MY OWN EYES...
...THAT "WALL" AT THE SOUTHERN EDGE OF THE WORLD.

PROFES-SOR...
I CAN SAY FOR CERTAIN THAT, SOMEWHERE IN THIS FOREST, THERE IS A LIGHT-BENDING WALL THAT IS KEEPING THE DRAGONS OUT OF HUMAN LANDS.
FOR SOME AS YET UNKNOWN REASON, THAT WALL IS NOW COMING APART.
WHICH EXPLAINS WHY MORE ARE WANDERING IN.
ACCORD-INGLY...
IN THE MONTHS AFTER LEAVING HIERAGLION ...
...I GATHERED DATA, AND CAME CLOSER TO THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM.

IF RUNE'S THEORY PROVES TRUE, THEN THIS BECOMES MORE THAN A SIMPLE QUEST FOR ONE DRAGON KNIGHT. IT WILL BE A DISCOVERY OF HISTORIC PROPORTIONS FOR ALL OF BOTH GRAAL AND KAGWELL.
HOWEVER, ASTRONOMY IS A HERETICAL ART.
NEITHER I NOR ANY OTHER KNIGHT HERE CAN DO ANYTHING TO PROVE OR DISPROVE IT.
...I AM GOING TO GO FIND THAT WALL AND VERIFY ITS CONDITION FOR MYSELF.
RUNE IS THE ONLY ONE WITH THE LEEWAY TO DO THAT.
SO WE MADE A DEAL.
RUNE WILL INFORM ME OF WHATEVER CONCLUSION HE REACHES, AND IN EXCHANGE I WILL NOT ARREST HIM.

I'M GOING, TOO!!
IT IS A VERY GOOD DEAL, I BELIEVE. TO BE HONEST, I DIDN'T FEEL RIGHT ABOUT ARRESTING RUNE IN THE FIRST PLACE.
FIRIEL...
YOU CAN'T LET HIM GO ALONE! IT'S SUICIDE!
THAT FOREST IS CRAWLING WITH MEAT-EATING DRAGONS!
AND I DON'T WANT TO BE SEPARATED FROM HIM EVER AGAIN!!!
EUSIS...
I NEED TO TALK TO FIRIEL. ALONE.

LOOKING AT HIM NOW, IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE THERE EVER WAS A TIME WHEN WE KISSED...
HIS FACE LOOKS SO COLD. IT'S LIKE HE'S SOMEONE I DON'T KNOW.
WHY...?
WHY DOES IT FEEL LIKE WE'RE SO FAR APART?
FIRIEL...

...ONCE I REPORT TO EUSIS WHATEVER RESULTS I FIND AT THE WALL, I AM GOING TO DISAPPEAR.
THIS TIME FOR REAL.
YOU WILL NEVER SEE ME AGAIN.

WHY, RUNE?! TELL ME WHY!!
WHY?!
RUNE!!
I AM PART OF A CERTAIN... ORGANIZATION NOW.

ONCE I KILLED THE DUKE, I RAN...
...NOT JUST FROM THE PALACE, BUT AWAY FROM GRAAL.
IF I HADN'T, I WOULD HAVE BEEN FORCED INTO BECOMING LEANDRA'S PAWN.
THAT'S WHEN THEY CAME.
THEY FOUND ME, AND SAVED ME.

YES. THE CIRCLE OF HERMES.
"ORGANI-ZATION" ...?
RUNE, YOU DON'T MEAN--

OF COURSE! FOR ONCE, THE PROFESSOR AND RUNE WILL BE JOINING US...
...SO WE HAVE TO MAKE THIS YEAR'S HONEYBEE FESTIVAL A SPECIAL ONE!
OOH, ALL THIS FOOD LOOKS SO YUMMY!
KYA!
WHERE ARE THE BAD LITTLE CHILDREN?! BRING OUT THE BAD LITTLE CHILDREN!
NOO!!!
THE GREEN MAN HAS COME TO TAKE ALL THE BAD LITTLE CHILDREN AWAY!

Side Story: The Other Me

WHY'S RUNE SCARED OF THE GREEN MAN?
I KNOW I TOLD HIM IT WAS ALL 'KAY.
I SAID THE GREEN MAN WAS JUST PAPA BO ALL DRESSED UP.
AND THAT THE REAL GREEN MAN LOOKS SCARY, BUT HE'S REALLY A NICE MONSTER THAT BRINGS PRESENTS TO GOOD CHILDREN!
YOU HAVE TO BE KIDDING ME!!

AND YOU GOT HIM FROM GYPSIES?! WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?!
TABITHA...
A CHILD THAT FILTHY HAS GOT TO BE RIDDLED WITH ALL SORTS OF DISEASES!
EVERYBODY KNOWS GYPSIES ARE JUST A BUNCH OF THIEVES AND MURDERERS!
WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO IF FIRIEL CATCHES ANY OF THEM?!
A CHILD RAISED BY A WORTHLESS LOT LIKE THAT WILL NEVER BE A DECENT HUMAN BEING!
TAKE HIM BACK! NOW!!

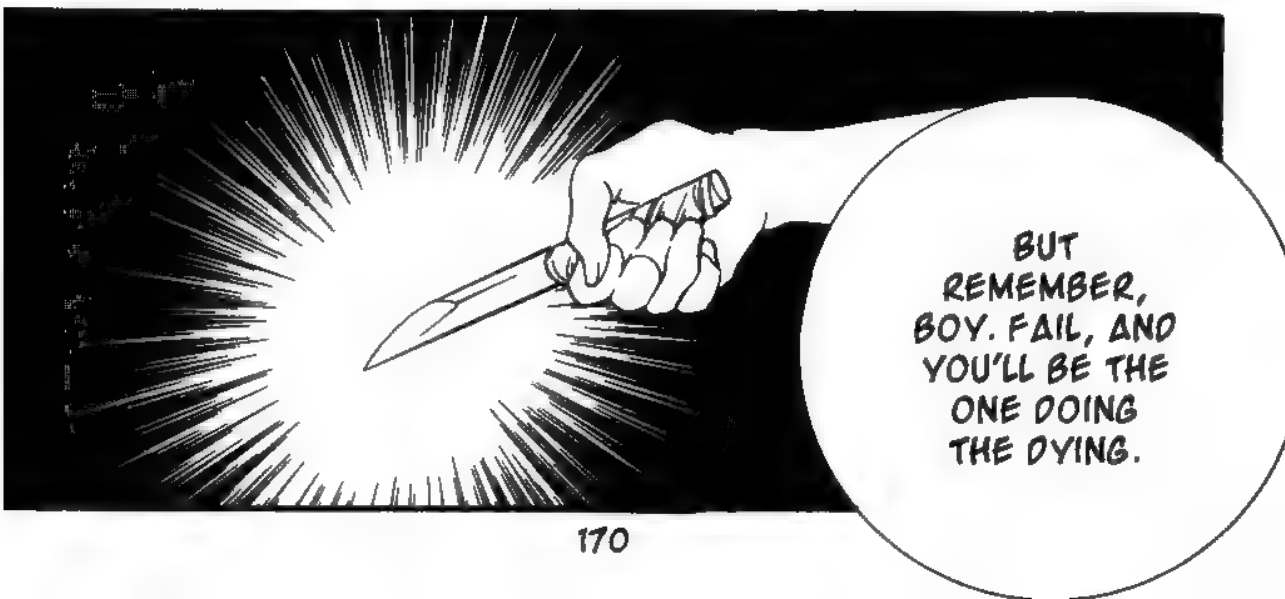
HOW ARE YOU FEELING?
RUNE?
PROFES-SOR.
PROFES-SOR, YOU'RE SMART.
SMARTER THAN ANYONE I EVER MET.
BUT YOU DON'T WANT ME TO BE YOUR APPRENTICE.
YOU KNOW I'M REALLY A BAD BOY.
BUT THE GREEN MAN DIDN'T KNOW.
WHY DIDN'T THE GREEN MAN TAKE ME? HE'S SUPPOSED TO TAKE AWAY ALL THE BAD CHILDREN, AND I'M A BAD BOY.

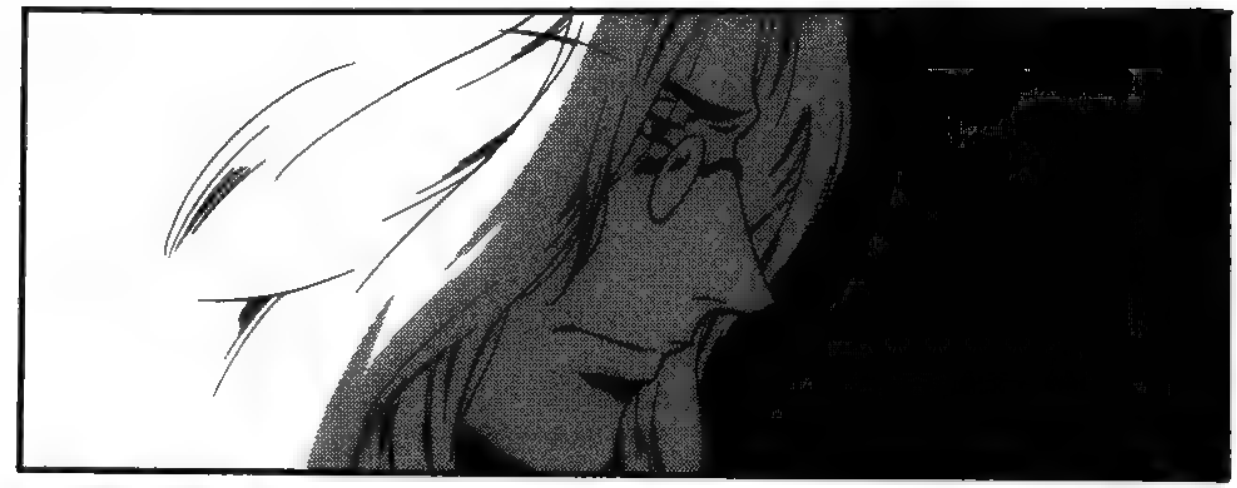
THE PEOPLE FROM BEFORE SAID THEY COULD USE ME...

...AND I'M PRETTY.
...BECAUSE I'M SMART...

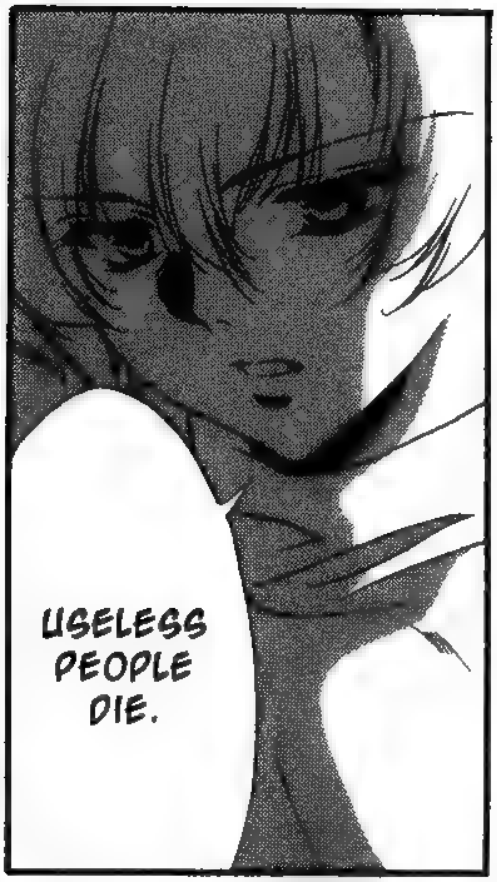
HEH HEH HEH. ONE OF THE PERKS OF "GOOD BREEDING," HUH?
...HOW MANY NOBLES OUT THERE LIKE 'EM YOUNG.
YOU'D BE SURPRISED ...
TOO BAD IT AIN'T A GIRL.

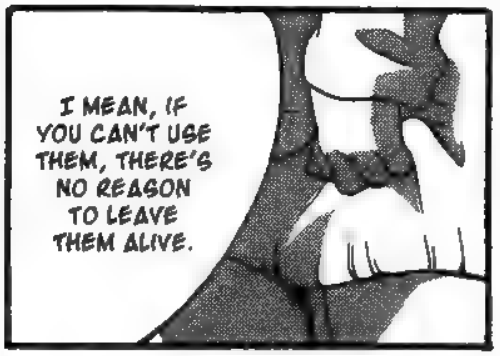
YOUR TARGET'S TIRED AND WON'T BE PAYING ATTENTION. I'LL SHOW YOU WHAT TO DO WITH THE KNIFE, NEXT.
YOU WAIT UNTIL AFTER-WARD.
LISTEN, BOY.


BUT REMEMBER, BOY. FAIL, AND YOU'LL BE THE ONE DOING THE DYING.



ARE YOU GOING TO USE ME, PROFESSOR? OR ARE YOU GOING TO KILL ME?


USELESS PEOPLE DIE.


I MEAN, IF YOU CAN'T USE THEM, THERE'S NO REASON TO LEAVE THEM ALIVE.

BO HOLY SAID HE BROUGHT YOU HERE BECAUSE HE WAS IMPRESSED WITH YOUR INTELLIGENCE, RIGHT?
I'M SURE THAT'S TRUE, BUT LIKELY HE WAS WORRIED ABOUT ME.
HE KNOWS THAT THIS RESEARCH OF MINE WILL NEVER BE KNOWN OUTSIDE OF THIS TOWER.
I AM MEANT TO ROT THE REST OF MY LIFE AWAY UP HERE.
BUT I'VE ACCEPTED THAT. I NO LONGER THINK IT'S NECESSARY FOR SOMEONE TO CONTINUE MY RESEARCH AFTER I'M GONE.
HENCE I HAVE NO NEED FOR AN APPRENTICE.

SO ARE YOU GOING TO KILL ME, THEN?
ギリ!!

DO YOU THINK FIRIEL WOULD LIKE THAT?
DO YOU THINK SHE'D SAY...
...THAT IF YOU AREN'T USEFUL, IT'S OKAY FOR YOU TO DIE?
"I'M GLAD YOU'RE ALIVE!"

WHY DON'T YOU TRY LOOKING AT THE WORLD THROUGH THESE GLASSES?
YOU WILL BE ABLE TO SEE THE PEOPLE AROUND YOU MUCH MORE CLEARLY THIS WAY.
I'M SURE YOU WILL SEE MANY THINGS YOU NEVER SAW BEFORE.

THE SUN RISES AND SETS, WHETHER WE OBSERVE THE HONEYBEE FESTIVAL OR NOT.
RUNE, WAS THAT UNNECESSARY FESTIVAL...
YET EVERYONE LOOKS FORWARD TO IT EVERY YEAR.
SO THE FESTIVAL IS "UNNEC-ESSARY."

...TRULY SOMETHING YOU WANT TO DO WITHOUT?

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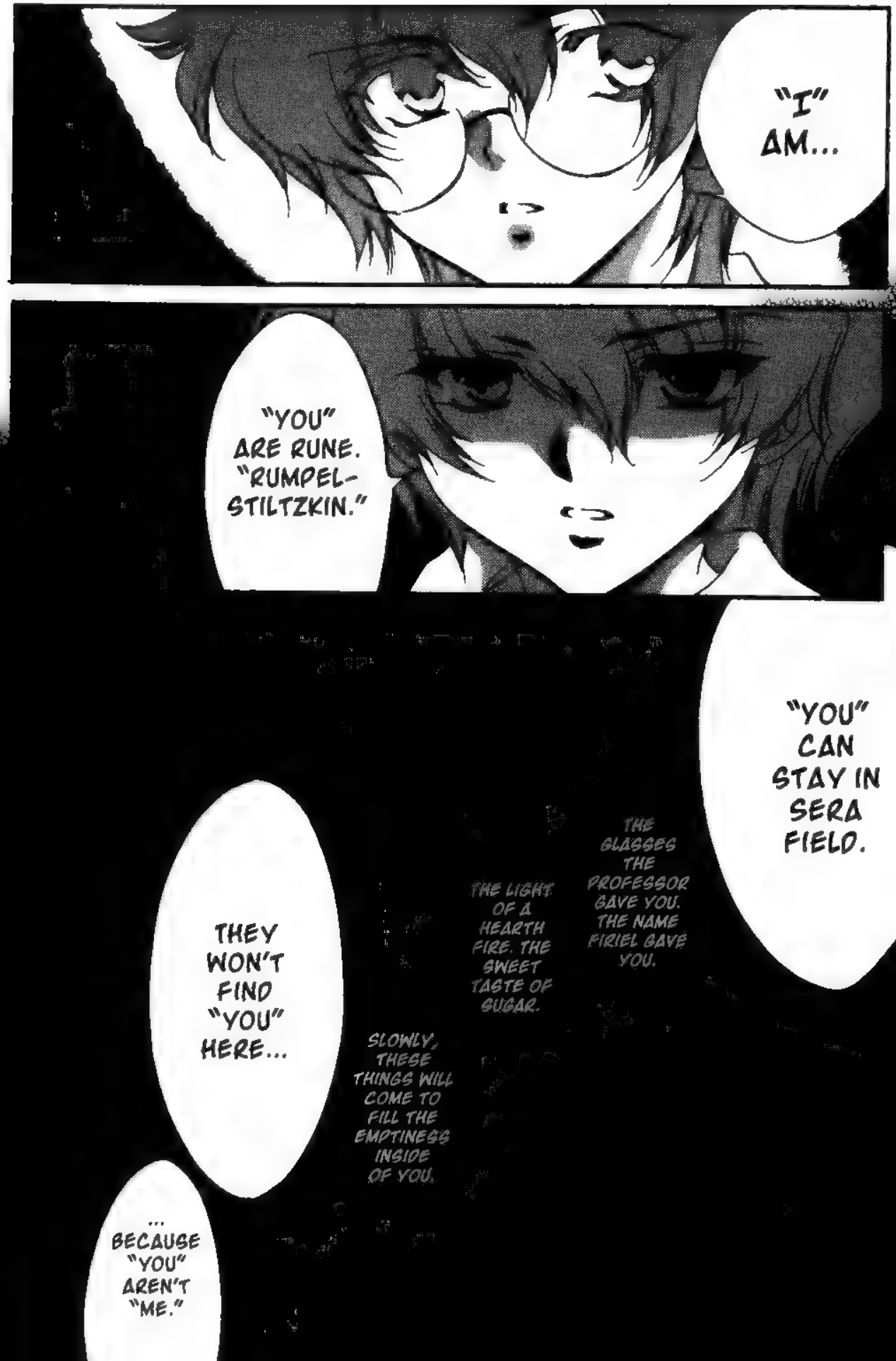

"I" AM...
"YOU" ARE RUNE. "RUMPEL-STILTZKIN."
"YOU" CAN STAY IN SERA FIELD.
THE GLASSES THE PROFESSOR GAVE YOU. THE NAME FIRIEL GAVE YOU.
THE LIGHT OF A HEARTH FIRE. THE SWEET TASTE OF SUGAR.
SLOWLY, THESE THINGS WILL COME TO FILL THE EMPTINESS INSIDE OF YOU.
THEY WON'T FIND "YOU" HERE...
... BECAUSE "YOU" AREN'T "ME."

"YOU" AREN'T "ME."
"YOU" SHOULD STAY IN SERA FIELD.
STUPID RUNE!
IF YOU'RE GONNA GO TO THE VILLAGE FESTIVAL, YOU GOTTA TAKE OFF THOSE STUPID, UGLY GLASSES!

SERA FIELD IS GOOD.
I WANT TO STAY HERE FOREVER.
I WON'T GO ANY-WHERE.
BUT PAPA BO!
CALM DOWN, CHILDREN...
THEN I WON'T GO.
FIRIEL, CALM DOWN...
FINE! BE THAT WAY! STUPID RUNE!
DUMMY! YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND ANYTHING!

RUNE. BEFORE, HE WOULDN'T EVER DARE GIVE HIS OWN OPINION ON ANYTHING, ESPECIALLY IF IT WAS DIFFERENT FROM EVERYONE ELSE'S.
ABOUT WHAT, DEAR?
I MUST ADMIT, I AM A LITTLE RELIEVED.
HE'S FINALLY GETTING USED TO LIFE IN SERA FIELD.
BUT I STILL THINK HE'S STUPID!
NO BAD GUYS ARE GONNA TRY'N TAKE HIM AWAY IF HE GOES TO THE VILLAGE!

I'D BEAT 'EM ALL UP BEFORE THEY COULD GET TO HIM!
I WANT TO STAY HERE FOREVER...
End of Book 5

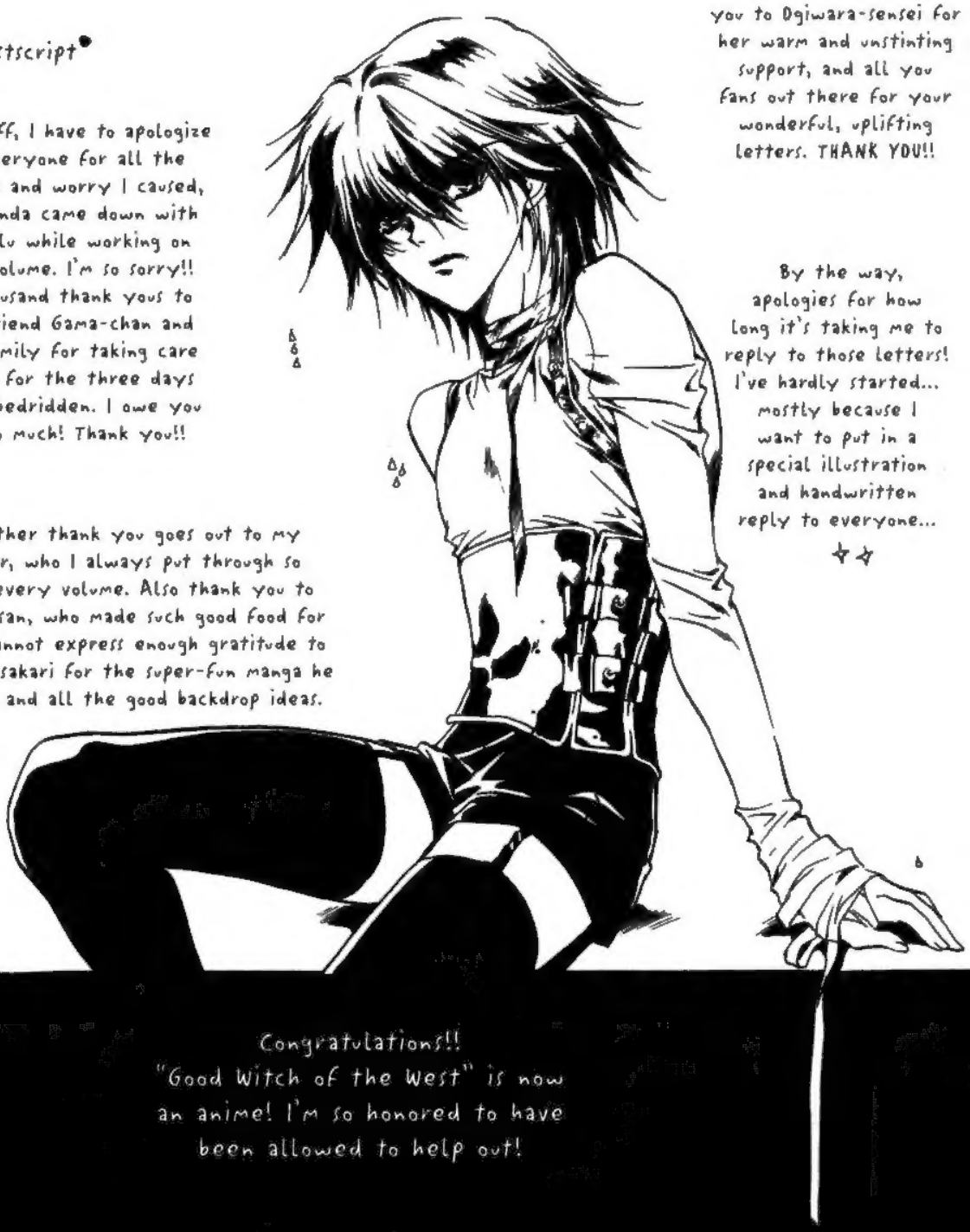
Postscript

First off, I have to apologize to everyone for all the trouble and worry I caused, as I kinda came down with the flu while working on this volume. I'm so sorry!! A thousand thank yous to my friend Gama-chan and her family for taking care of me for the three days I was bedridden. I owe you all so much! Thank you!!

Another thank you goes out to my editor, who I always put through so much every volume. Also thank you to Yuchie-san, who made such good food for me. I cannot express enough gratitude to Ichiro Kusakari for the super-fun manga he writes, and all the good backdrop ideas.

And, of course, thank you to Ogiwara-sensei for her warm and unstinting support, and all you fans out there for your wonderful, uplifting letters. THANK YOU!!

By the way, apologies for how long it's taking me to reply to those letters! I've hardly started... mostly because I want to put in a special illustration and handwritten reply to everyone...



Congratulations!! "Good Witch of the West" is now an anime! I'm so honored to have been allowed to help out!

And Adale is soooooo cute!

And thank you to my bestest of best friends, who help and support me every day!

2006.4.21

桃川春日子

Haruhiko Momokawa

Adele-chan!

Momokawa, upon seeing the "Good Witch" anime for the first time

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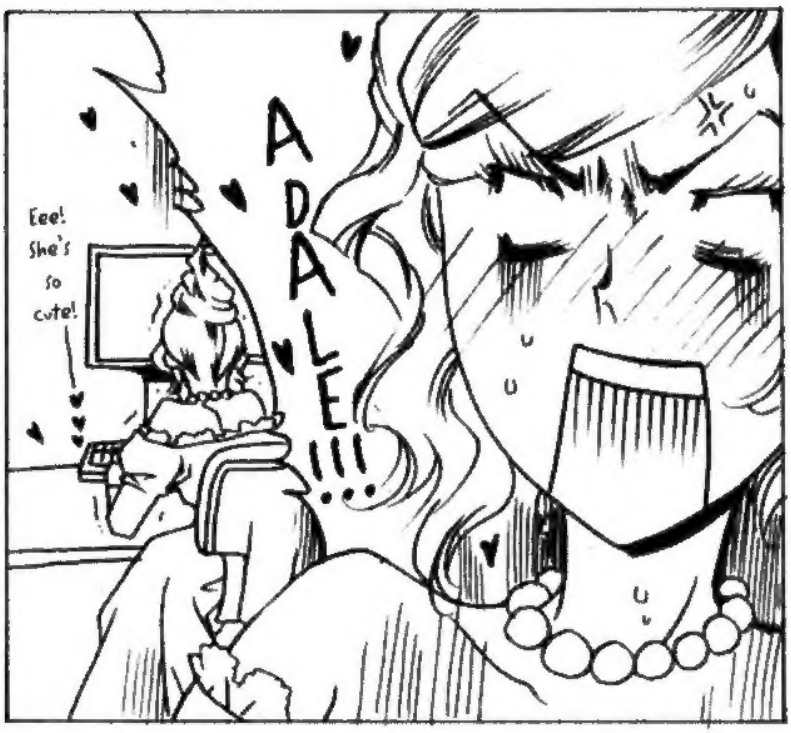

...well, she is.

Dear Mother,

When I found Rune again,
I swore I'd never let him go!
But stupid me, I managed to pass
through the invisible wall, and now
I'm on the other side with no way to
get back. There's a man here who
claims to be a bard and is following
me around, but who is he really?

Firiel Dee

In the Next

The Good Witch of the West™